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Palm Sunday – Year A (April 5, 2020)

Praised be Jesus Christ!

Brothers and sisters, as we enter the holiest week of the year, commemorating the Lord's Passion and Resurrection, our sorrow at not being able to celebrate these sacred rites publicly is acute, especially since our exile will continue well into the Easter season. However, I want to suggest to you that in this exile there is a certain lesson to be learned from the events of Holy Week itself. To understand this lesson, we must understand the symbolism of places.

For much of history, the city is the symbol of order, knowledge, justice. From the Latin word for city, *civis*, we get the concept of civilization. To be outside the city and its walls is the very essence of disorder, ignorance, and injustice. The Latin word for the countryside was *pagus*, and anything related to it was *paganus*. Since Christianity came to this area last of all (as late as the 10th Century), the word for idol-worshippers comes to us today as "pagans". But the roots of these ideas are even in the Old Testament. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were foreigners and wanderers in the land God promised to give to their descendants. Not until Joshua did Israelites begin to live in towns, and though many of them always lived outside of cities, the whole land of Israel was considered the Holy Land, and what was beyond its borders was heathen. But with the building of the Temple, Jerusalem came to be considered God's chosen place. His dwelling there was the mark of His covenant with His people. Because of this, the Babylonian Exile and destruction of the Temple were a great sorrow to Israel. But when the people rebuilt the city—its walls and its Temple—they waited in intense hope for the Messiah, who would restore the fortunes of the city and all Israel, and not only that, but who would bring the entire world into the order and justice ordained by God.

Fast-forward to Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem with all the fanfare of the rightful King of Israel. He comes to the Temple. What does He find there? He finds merchants and money-changers selling the things necessary for the rites of the Temple. He drives them out and declares that God has decreed that His House shall be a house of prayer. But what was wrong with what they were doing? Again, we must understand the meaning of sacred space. The physical building of the Temple, the so-called Tabernacle, contained two rooms, separated by a veil. At the center was the Holy of Holies, into which the high priest entered only once a year. The outer room was called the Holy Place. In it the priests offered incense twice a day. There were found the perpetual lampstand and the Bread of the Presence. Immediately outside the building was the Court of Israel, where adult Jews could enter to pray. Here was found the altar on which the animal sacrifices were offered by the priests. Outside of this was the Court of the Women. Finally, outside of this was the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews could enter to pray to God. The merchants and money-changers were set-up in this outer court.

Now let us recall the scripture passage Jesus quotes. The full line is this: "My House shall be a house of prayer *for all nations*." Jesus is specifically objecting to the fact that the practice of the Temple so filled-up the Court of the Gentiles as to prevent their worship of God. The people who said they awaited the Messiah used the

Temple in a way that prevented the use of the Temple as anticipated in the Kingdom of the Messiah. This was just another example of the religious hypocrisy that Jesus so often criticized. It was a religious hypocrisy that exempted everyday life from the holiness demanded by Divine Worship. This was a problem that had plagued Israel for centuries, and it can easily beset us, too. You see, all the purification rituals of the Jews were meant to prepare one to offer sacrifice and to be counted among the inhabitants of the city (remember what that means?). However, it was easy to focus on the external actions and forget that it demanded holiness of life from God's people—a holiness of life meant to attract all the nations to Divine Worship.

When Jesus cleanses the Temple, He sets in motion his plan to establish what he told the Samaritan woman at the well: "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem.... The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth...." Jesus would be judged and condemned in the city, near the Temple. He would be driven out of the city and crucified on the tiny hill of Golgotha—outside the walls, and in this He was counted accursed. But that site was directly in line with the Temple. Indeed, He would face directly towards to the Temple and hear the bleating of the lambs as they were sacrificed. But He was the true Paschal Lamb, and He was sacrificed outside the city, a city which no longer was the Divine Dwelling Place, but an earthly city. In this He shows us that the true sacrifice, the worship in Spirit and truth—the Holy Mass—must bear its fruit through the entire world, not just the city.

Our city, by God's grace, is not on this earth. Our city is the New Jerusalem, in Heaven. The Holy Mass is our encounter with and participation in the sacrifice outside the earthly city, drawn up in the Ascension into the heavenly city. From this sacrifice we draw out the graces necessary to be holy in our everyday lives. Since you are now separated from this sacrifice physically, let it serve as a reminder that one is not accounted a Christian by how much they do at church. Christian life is lived where everyone else's lives are lived—in the family, in the workplace, in the community. If we have been deprived of the source of that Christian life, perhaps it is a reminder, as was Jesus' purification of the Temple, that we must avoid the hypocrisy of being a Christian in church, and outside of the church no different from anyone else.

This Holy Week, I invite you to unite yourselves to Christ, who was driven out of his beloved city. Unite yourselves to Our Lady, who was denied every attempt to comfort her Son, and who was separated from Him by his death. Unite yourselves to Peter, who wept at the realization that his actions did not live up to his bold words when Jesus was with him. Now is the time to live truly Christian lives, in Spirit and in truth. Act justly, show mercy, pray always. If you do this you show that even from far away the fruits of the Mass are within you. If you do not, even with the Mass your worship is hollow. Christ died to give us life. To fill us up. Let him fill you with every grace, by the merits of his Cross and Resurrection.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.