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Retreat at the Casa Maria of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word  
Irondale, Alabama  
“Pope Benedict XVI and Prayer”  
March 16-18, 2012

### **HOMILY 3, GOD’S LOVE AND OURS**

2 Cor 36: 14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137: 1-6; Eph 2:4-10; Jn 3:14-21

1. As we come to the end of this time away with Jesus on retreat pondering with his vicar on earth how we are to pray and to live, the word of God brings us to what Pope Benedict called in his first encyclical the “heart of the Christian faith.” We began this retreat focusing on the first and great commandment of loving God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength,” loving him in our prayer and together with him loving him in our neighbor. We conclude today by focusing on the mind-blowing reality of how God has loved us in accordance with his infinite totality. “God so loved the world,” Jesus tells Nicodemus and us in the Gospel,” that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” This love of God, St. Paul tells us in the Second reading, is always a merciful love. “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ, ... raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Jesus Christ, so that in the ages to come, he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” God is love. He is mercy. And he showed that love by sending his Son to die to bring us to life in him, to raise us up in him. The whole meaning of the Christian life is to receive, respond to, and remain in this love, in these immeasurable riches of God’s kindness. It’s only those who believe in Christ who won’t perish but have this life even now. And so we respond, with the words of the first letter of St. John, “We have to come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.” We have come to believe in this love not merely as a concept, but as a Person, the person whom we meet in prayer, the person who is the image of the Father’s love and the one who introduces us into the love within the heart of the Blessed Trinity. Our prayer is the means by which we put that belief in God’s love into practice, receive that love even more each day as it packed down and poured into our lap, and as it is able to overflow into acts of love toward others.
2. But there’s a danger that this love can become so sentimentalized that it can lose its power. See the example of football stadiums while football players are stomping with their cleats on their adversaries, cursing in huddles, getting drunk in the stands, watching scantily clad cheerleaders like Herod Antipas watched his step-daughter dance. That’s why it’s very important for us not to miss the thought that Jesus gave us immediately before, the means by which God showed his great love. We can’t have John 3:16 without John 3:14-15.
3. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”
  - a. Pope Benedict gave us an analysis of this text. This passage takes us back to the book of Genesis.
    - i. Roman Homily, March 1985: The story to which reference is made here leads us back not just from today to the hour of the Cross and from there to Israel’s time in the desert; it takes us back to paradise, to the tree from which the serpent hung and from which the serpent blinded man with its deceitful logic so that he was no longer able to see the goodness of God, but came to regard it as threatening, as dangerous, as a burden; so that he could no longer see the truth, and the serpent’s lie tempted and convinced him. In the false light of this logic, man no longer asked what was good and true in itself, but only what he could have for himself; what he could create for himself. Since man was himself dazzled by the serpent’s deceitful lie, he no longer saw God; he no longer saw himself, and so he turned away from life even while he dreamed that he was grasping a life that was real. He became blind and empty. Against the power of this life that entraps man and no longer lets him live, God has raised up the anti-serpent, Christ, who hangs on the Cross so that we may learn once more to see things as they are. Whoever looks upon the Crucified One sees what love

is. Whoever looks upon the Crucified One is, in his turn, looked upon with love. And this gives him truth. The gaze of love and the goodness of God let him live.

- b. It refers, principally, to that scene in Numbers 21 when the Israelites in the desert spoke against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” 6 Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”
  - c. What a mysterious scene. They would look at, lifted up on a pole, an image of what their sins had caused (death), at what was killing them, and be cured. It doesn’t make sense to the Jews. It only makes sense as a prophetic act.
  - d. Pope Benedict on this passage said, back in 1985:
    - i. Jesus had to be “lifted up” onto the Cross. He had to die the death the serpent’s bite caused, although He Himself had not been bitten. He took the poison for us. Out of His love for the world, God sent His Son to save us from sure death. In Moses’ day, the people had to look at the creature who had poisoned them and **believe** that God would heal them. Now, we must look at Jesus on the Cross, a human being, a man just like the one through whom the poison of the serpent in Eden spread to the whole human race, and **believe** we will be healed by the re-birth we so desperately need. When the people saw the serpent in the wilderness, it reminded them of their disobedience. When we see Jesus on the Cross, it reminds us of the gravity of our sin. We can see so clearly that it requires judgment and that death is its just punishment. When Jesus was “lifted up” out of death and then “lifted up” to Heaven at the Ascension, we know that our debt has been paid. We die with Jesus, in baptism, and yet we live (“born of water and the Spirit”).
    - ii. June 5, 2009 homily in Cypress: As a punishment for their sin, the people of Israel, languishing in the desert, were bitten by serpents and could only be saved from death by looking upon the emblem that Moses raised up, foreshadowing the Cross that would put an end to sin and death once and for all. We see clearly that man cannot save himself from the consequences of his sin. **He cannot save himself from death.** Only God can release him from his moral and physical enslavement. And because he loved the world so much, he sent his only-begotten Son, not to condemn the world - as justice seemed to demand - but so that through him the world might be saved. God's only-begotten Son had to be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that all who looked upon him with faith might have life.
4. That points to the meaning of the Cross in our life, of Christ on the Cross, of a cruciform Christian prayer and spirituality.
  5. In Cypress, Pope Benedict said: The wood of the Cross became **the vehicle for our redemption**, just as the tree from which it was fashioned had occasioned the Fall of our first parents. Suffering and death, which had been a consequence of sin, were to become the very means by which **sin was vanquished**. The innocent Lamb was slain on the altar of the Cross, and yet from the immolation of the victim new life burst forth: the power of evil was destroyed by the power of self-sacrificing love.
  6. The Cross, then, is something far greater and more mysterious than it at first appears. It is indeed an instrument of torture, suffering and defeat, but at the same time it expresses the complete transformation, the definitive reversal of these evils: that is what makes it the most eloquent symbol of hope that the world has ever seen. It speaks to all who suffer - the oppressed, the sick, the poor, the outcast, the victims of violence - and it offers them hope that God can transform their suffering into joy, their isolation into communion, their death into life. It **offers unlimited hope** to our fallen world.
  7. That is why the world needs the Cross. **The Cross is not just a private symbol of devotion, it is not just a badge of membership of a certain group within society, and in its deepest meaning it has nothing to do with the imposition of a creed or a philosophy by force.** It speaks of hope, it speaks of love, it

speaks of the victory of non-violence over oppression, it speaks of God raising up the lowly, empowering the weak, conquering division, and overcoming hatred with love. A world without the Cross would be a world without hope, a world in which torture and brutality would go unchecked, the weak would be exploited and greed would have the final word. **Man's inhumanity to man would be manifested in ever more horrific ways, and there would be no end to the vicious cycle of violence. Only the Cross puts an end to it.** While no earthly power can save us from the consequences of our sins, and no earthly power can defeat injustice at its source, nevertheless the saving intervention of our loving God has transformed the reality of sin and death into its opposite. That is what we celebrate when we glory in the Cross of our Redeemer. Rightly does Saint Andrew of Crete describe the Cross as "more noble, more precious than anything on earth [...] for in it and through it and for it all the riches of our salvation were stored away and restored to us" (Oratio X; PG 97, 1018-1019).

8. The message of the Cross has been entrusted to us, so that we can offer hope to the world. When we proclaim Christ crucified we are proclaiming not ourselves, but him. **We are not offering our own wisdom to the world, nor are we claiming any merit of our own, but we are acting as channels for his wisdom, his love, his saving merits.** We know that we are merely earthenware vessels, and yet, astonishingly, we have been chosen to be heralds of the saving truth that the world needs to hear. Let us never cease to marvel at the extraordinary grace that has been given to us, let us never cease to acknowledge our unworthiness, but at the same time let us always strive to become less unworthy of our noble calling, lest through our faults and failings we weaken the credibility of our witness.
9. We are called to model our lives on the mystery of the Lord's cross. We are called not only to venerate the wood of the Cross, but to love Christ crucified.
10. 800 years ago today, St. Clare ran away from home to live according to the manner of the Holy Gospel that she saw enfolded as St. Francis. That way of the Gospel was focused totally on God's love and mercy and therefore was focused on the wisdom and power of God not only manifested to us by Christ on the Cross but given to us live by the Crucified Christ.
  - a. When Blessed John Paul II visited the Poor Clares in Assisi in 1993 to begin celebrations for the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Clare's birth, he summarized her entire life by calling her "a *passionate lover of the poor, crucified Christ, with whom she wants to identify absolutely.* He remarked on one of the letters she wrote to her spiritual daughters: "Look upon him who became contemptible for you, and follow him, making yourself contemptible in this world for him. Your Spouse, though more beautiful than the children of men, became for your salvation the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout his entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the cross... Gaze upon him, consider him, contemplate him, as you desire to imitate him. If you suffer with him, you shall rejoice with him; if you die with him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendour of the saints, and in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among men" (2LAg 19-22).
  - b. She had an "ardent desire for the poor, crucified Christ." She referred to "the hard bed of the cross" as her "sweet nuptial bed." She had an "ardent desire for the poor, Crucified Christ" that allowed her to accept so many sufferings and illnesses and bear them with love and serenity, offering them up with Christ in merciful supplication for the world. She was crucified with Christ — because she was crucified to the world and the world to her — and the life she lived was no longer hers, but one of faith in the Son of God who loved her and gave himself up for her. The Cross became her glory and she boasted in nothing else. This led, Pope Benedict said, to her love for poverty on account of the poor Christ and her love for the Eucharist in which Christ appears in his most vulnerable, naked humility, giving his same body and blood to us in time. It influenced all her prayer and the contemplation of the Poor Clares to this day.
11. Like St. Clare, we are called not just to seek God in prayer, but to find God, love God and become one with the God who is love and mercy. This too means that we are to become passionate lovers of Christ crucified. Not only to behold him lifted up as a serpent, but to climb up with him on the tree of life. St. Clare spoke of the nuptial bed of the cross. St. Edith Stein wrote about being a bride with Christ on the Cross. As the Church, the bride of Christ we are called to be one with him on the cross in nuptial love uniting all our sufferings to his out of co-redemptive love and mercy for the world for which out of his great love gave his life.

12. Pope Benedict wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, Christ's death on the cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ we can understand the starting point of the encyclical letter, *God is Love*. It is there that this truth can be contemplated and from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path on which his life and love must move.
13. We've come to the end of the retreat. Jesus came into the world to restore true worship, true prayer, and true life in union with God. The only worship that makes sense is to present ourselves together with the Bridegroom, body and soul as a holy living and acceptable sacrifice to God the Father.
14. Pope Benedict said, We see the path of life and love from the pierced side of Christ.
15. We know that Jesus is that New Temple. He is that new Adam from whose rib the New Eve was born. It was from the trickle of water and blood flowing from his side, that we saw in that image of Ezekiel 47, that eventually went down into the desert to the Dead Sea, giving life wherever it went, going from a trickle up to our head so we would have to swim in that living water. It is that water flowing from the Eastern side of Christ, the New Temple that we would become new temples. Every time we come to Mass we are to be re-consecrated in Christ, the true Temple; to become true temples of his presence and his glory as we are bathed in the sacramental life-giving water and blood that flows from his Eastern side.
16. In the first reading we saw all the sins of the Israelites that led to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. We behold the destruction our sins have caused. We see at the end of that first reading how through Cyrus, after the Exile, God rebuilt the Temple. That was a prophecy of the resurrection after three days.
17. The Jews could never forget the Temple. We sang about that in the responsorial psalm. We can never forget Christ's love and mercy on the cross that rebuilt not only this temple, but us, united in one Temple, in prayerful contemplation with the Lord. Every time we come to Mass we are called to be re-consecrated in the truth, to live the truth as Jesus says. That consecration means first to be set aside for God, in order for us to be sent back out.
18. Over these days we have consecrated ourselves to the Lord, come apart and set aside, but now he wishes to send us back. The Eucharist is the continuing mission of God's saving love for mankind. God who is rich in mercy because of his great love he gave his life on the cross, gives us what we would never have asked for. God to love us so much as to give us his only son as spiritual food. So let us come and become one with this Word, one with this crucified love, out of passionate love for Christ crucified, let us believe in the love God has for us and pass on this love to the world who desperately needs to know that love.