

**Homily for Palm Sunday
March 24, 2013**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Marathon runners reach a difficult hurdle on their way to the finish line of the 26.2 mile course. It is called "hitting the wall." Between about miles 20 and 26, their body and spirit threaten to give out. The mind is screaming for the runner to stop. It takes great effort and mental discipline to push through that obstacle and persevere to the end. Along the course, people shout encouragement and reach out with water, to help the runners along.

We have been jogging along through the long weeks of Lent. Now we come to another Holy Week, and we may feel like we are hitting a proverbial spiritual wall. It is an opportunity for us to get a second wind, so that we can make it through to the glorious finish of Easter celebration. Jesus reaches out to help us get there, even if we have stumbled on the way.

The long Passion Gospel of Saint Luke today begins in the upper room, with Jesus offering bread and wine, saying, “Do this as a memorial of me,” before taking his faithful ones into the garden of Gethsemane, where he begged them to “watch and pray.” On Holy Thursday, this is what we do. Palm Sunday was the great day of the Lord! Jesus arrived at last as the Messiah, to enter and claim his own city, the royal city of David, Jerusalem, and to set up his throne.

Up to the moment of his triumphal entrance into the city of Jerusalem, Jesus did not accept the people’s desire to acclaim him as their Messiah and King. Today, though, not only does he accept these acclamations, but he takes them to himself. The requisitioning of the animal on which he would ride, especially one upon which no one had yet ridden, is the right of a king (cf. Luke 19:30). The animal chosen by the Lord is one upon which the prophet Zechariah said the king would ride (cf. Zechariah 9:9). Even the spreading of cloaks on the road was an honor given to Israel’s kings (cf. Luke 19:36, II Kings 9:13). For those with eyes to see, the signs of his kingship are clear as day.

Yet the crowd that first welcomed him with such a fervent enthusiasm soon walked away from him. Father Romano Guardini, a

Catholic priest, author, and academic who was one of the most important figures in Catholic intellectual life in 20th-century, observed that

No matter what Jesus said - though he uttered words of divine power and profundity - invariably they were answered with stubbornness, distrust, and hate. No matter what he did - heal, help, pardon, shower with gifts - his thanks were hardness of heart, calumny, misinterpretation of his motives, blasphemy against the Spirit.¹

As Jesus entered the city the people saw in him the fulfillment of all of their hopes. This is why they cried out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" (Luke 19:38). Even so, they did not stay with him.

Through the course of this week we will see - and perhaps even be part of - two different crowds. "The crowd that paid homage to Jesus at the gateway to the city was not the same crowd that later demanded his crucifixion. In this two-stage account of the failure to recognize Jesus - through a combination of indifference and fear - we see something of the city's tragedy of which Jesus spoke a number of times."²

In the final analysis, we can see that the crowd – both collectively and as individuals – did not believe in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. They saw a man, a teacher, a failed zealot. Despite the truth of his words and the power of his signs and miracles, they would not believe in him. What do we see when we look at him? How much faith have we put in him?

In his reflections on *The Sadness of Christ*, Saint Thomas More considered our often lax response of faith. He said:

How much more, then, should we be ashamed of our miserable performance and recognize the enormous guilt we incur by saying no more than a short prayer or two, perhaps, during the day, and even those said as we doze and yawn. Finally our Savior tells us to pray, not that we may roll in wealth, not that we may live in a continuous round of pleasures, not that something awful may happen to our enemies, not that we may receive honor in this world, but rather that we may not enter into temptation.³

In this Holy Week we have the opportune moment to consider the Lord's love for us and our love for him. Let us be neither afraid nor indifferent to consider the strength of our faith and the depth of love, but strive rather to

increase both, that we, too, may devotedly bend the knee before him who died for us.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2002), 364-365.

² Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 8.

³ Saint Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ and Final Prayers and Benedictions*. Clarence Miller, trans. (New York: Scepter, 1993), 28.