

## Jasenovac

Cardinal Josip Bozanić, Archbishop of Zagreb  
Pilgrimage by the Priests of the Archdiocese  
Prayer of the Sixth Hour — Homily  
Jasenovac, Parish Church, September 24, 2009  
Liturgical Reading: 1 Pt 3, 14-17

Dear Fellow Bishops and Presbyters,  
Fellow Brothers in the Priesthood of Christ,  
Brothers and Sisters,

1. To be in Jasenovac as a priest and a Christian, listening to the words of the Apostle Peter about being called into account for the hope that is in us elicits a specific and powerful response. We find ourselves in a place not recorded on only a single page of history where evil, crime and above all sin were evident. Instead, the godlessness from this place sought to proliferate evil to an inconceivable level, spreading lies all the way up to the present.

We have come first of all to a church, to a place which, through us and our faith, unites the proximity of God, the Mystery of the Passion of Jesus, Death and Resurrection with our earthly journey, during which we are perplexed many times by the abuse of human freedom.

In Jasenovac, a person open to the truth experiences profound pain caused by violence, injustice and inhumanity. Here, many are confronted with the remembrance of the loss of loved ones. Here, much that is unspeakable is etched deeply into the soul, leaving grave questions unanswered and many poisoned by hatred.

We are here in a priestly memorial pilgrimage, not centered around the criminals and evils inflicted by them but instead around a specific testimony to faith, love and sacrifices; the mystery of suffering which, purified by the Spirit of God, becomes the strength for doing good. There is not a single place on earth where evil is so powerful that love and peace cannot speak out. This is what we bring and with which we wish to imbue this place where we come and pray. Nothing reaches as profoundly into the reality of the world and man as prayer. Because the beginning and source of prayer are in God, prayer encompasses all time and space, touching us and imbuing all our experience, merging the past, present and future within God's mercy.

2. Although with the passage of years there are fewer people who can testify about their experiences and the horrors of the Second World War, with their assistance and witness to the truth it is important for new generations to obtain and preserve an adequate understanding of these events, with all their cruelty and the need to purify memory.

New generations, especially children and young people, removed in time from the actual events, have the opportunity to illuminate the truth through their efforts. The truth is the only thing that can free us from the open and hidden conflicts stemming from its manipulation. As the Church, we wholeheartedly support the investigation of all the aspects of the events prior to, during and after the Second World War, which should be conducted as soon as possible and employ all means that respect the truth. Although much time has passed, during which there were a

multitude of opportunities, such efforts today would definitely not be in vain and are greatly needed. Efforts should be made concerning the availability of all the relevant documents and testimonies, the opening of the archives pertinent to understanding the overall context, and the application of a valid scientific method, imbued with the desire for the truth and commitment to the good.

This task, which may appear to be the exclusive domain of historians – since it is usually said that professionals should engage in history, while others should look toward the future – is not solely the concern of historians but of each of us. We know that much, especially peace, depends upon each of us: our aspirations, attitudes, words and gestures, and above all our efforts to be open to the truth. As believers, reciting psalms during the liturgy we implored: "Lead me in thy truth and teach me, for thou art the God of my salvation" (Ps 25:5). Who prays thus in the depths of his heart cannot deny the existence of fundamental human rights or efface moral principles.

When God together with morality based upon the common good and the good of others are removed from the personal and public environment, it is a short path to a craving for the domination, enslavement and extermination of groups of people, even entire nations. The happiness of individuals or nations cannot be built on the foundations of racial or class ideology, on the foundations of discrimination against ethnicity or religion, or on the foundations of godlessness that does not accept the truth that all people are God's creatures, equal in dignity.

3. In Jasenovac, we feel profound pain for all the victims, particularly those who suffered and were killed here by members of the Croatian nation, and even greater pain when the perpetrators were members of the Catholic Church. Although we acknowledge the sin of those who were unworthy to bear the Catholic name, the Catholic Church never participated in or supported such crimes. Moreover, although some want the Church to attribute failure to "omission," there are many indications that representatives of the Church and its members during that difficult period, engaged in various forms of opposition to the inhumane ideology directed against others, especially against members of the Jewish and Serbian nations, Roma as well as Croatian political dissidents.

The names of the victims, their lives and personal journeys through the darkness of the Jasenovac concentration camp obligate us to seek the truth. They cry out for this truth, because only truth brings us to that from which a person lives – to love. "To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity. Charity, in fact, rejoices in the truth (*Caritas in veritate*, 1). This place, as well as hundreds of other execution sites in Croatia, needs the truth, to which nothing is added or omitted, the truth that will not be suppressed by new ideologies or promote new levels of humiliation and crime.

We must not forget the precious models of courageous witnesses, among whom the most exemplary is undoubtedly the Blessed Aloysius Stepinac. The truth about the Blessed Aloysius has been suppressed, distorted, shrouded by a cloak of lies and has still yet to penetrate the hearts and minds of new generations. The victims of the Jasenovac camp cry out for the truth. They also cry out for the truth about our Beatus. The victims of the Jasenovac camp are honored when they are approached with honor, as evident in concern for the truthful and complete listing of all

the victims – to the extent that they are not instrumentalized for anyone's political errors or manipulations.

We are well aware of the extent to which the victims of the Jasenovac camp were manipulated for the purpose of stigmatizing the Croatian nation as a genocidal nation and the Croatian state as an undesirable entity. We know that such abuses were even used to justify many killings and crimes that have still not been called by their rightful names, not only immediately following the Second World War but also throughout the period of the communist regime, as well as in the preparation and perpetration of the aggression and violence in Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina during the 1980s and 1990s.

A well-intentioned person simply cannot understand, much less accept, that the victims of Bleiburg and the death marches were consequences of what the Ustasha regime did in Jasenovac. Frozen in amazement, we listened to the alleged excuses voiced by tyrants during the Homeland War (1991-1995), who killed so many, destroyed so many families and homes, inflicted such unspeakable pain and expelled innocent people from their homes, that they were acting preventively so that the atrocities perpetrated at the Ustasha camp in Jasenovac would not be repeated. It is even more incomprehensible that today, without any repercussions for what is said, one can hear lies propagated in the public square that the Catholic Church remains a haven for Ustasha sentiment.

4. Brothers and sisters, everything here cries out for truth and prayer. On our journey, filled with the fear of God, we ponder the limits of hatred, human destructiveness and cruelty. The site of the Jasenovac camp is a school where it is learned to what extent humans can be inhumane. Evil is not abstract. It is always tangible. It occurs in a specific place and is perpetrated by specific people. Here, one cannot remain indifferent to the suffering perpetrated against the victims of this camp. Here, profoundly sympathizing with the innocent victims, this sense of suffering gives one the right to exclaim in prayer: God, deliver us from evil!

While we pray here with Christian piety, remembering the victims of the Ustasha regime, from this place we also raise our cry for the truth about the victims of the communist regime because, unfortunately, it is still being concealed and denied in our country, as is the truth about the crimes of communism committed during the war, the postwar period and throughout its reign of terror. Why, even after nineteen years of democratic changes, are there still no list of the victims of communism, no due commemorations and no suitable memorials? Who is preventing this? Who opposes it? Why has the European Parliamentary Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism, dated April 2 of this year, in which it is clearly explained that reconciliation is the ultimate goal of the disclosure and assessment of the crimes committed by the communist totalitarian regimes, still not been implemented in our country?

Precisely such places cry out for peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, but also for remembrance. The outcry is for justice because to speak about injustice and affliction means to speak about the hope that believes in a more just world and finding theological meaning in human suffering. One must acknowledge unjustly inflicted suffering in order to stride into the future.

Brothers and sisters, Nazism, fascism and communism are part of Croatian history because the Croatian population was also afflicted by the tragedy of the twentieth century that, in the words of the Servant of God John Paul II, was marked by three great evils: fascism, Nazism and communism. To justify a totalitarian regime, i.e., to cover up and remain silent about the injustice that it inflicted, means to induce permanent unrest in society and the public because a historical lie is a crime. Questions regarding the Second World War and the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century will continue to generate unrest and hostility in our society as long as we do not apply the same measure toward all totalitarian regimes and until the same measure of remembrance is guaranteed to all the victims.

5. Why are we here today? We have come humbly to Jasenovac because we feel that the time has arrived to approach speaking about this place filled with pain in a manner that does not violate the truth, desiring that only prayer should be uttered here.

We did not come here for debate or polemics. Although some continue to seek apologies, justifications, statements or political views from us, we did not come here to convey them because precisely such utterances, based upon untruth, have frequently contaminated the truth. Nonetheless, it can be said that the Church has always manifested its freedom from political and other godless motives that guided the minds of those who gave the orders and the hands of the executioners in all dictatorships, i.e., those who created the Bolshevik gulags, Nazi and fascist concentration camps, and the communist prisons. The Church has done so and will continue to do so, although it has paid dearly with the lives of its faithful and leaders, and although it has been slandered without foundation.

When ideologues from various sides instructed the Catholic Church regarding what it should do concerning the Memorial Area of Jasenovac, they forgot that the Church is the bearer of truth, regardless of the sinfulness of its faithful, sinfulness for which we repent every day, attempting to be better followers of Jesus Christ. The Church cannot and must not be a part of the political violence perpetrated against the victims. With this pilgrimage, we first seek to open ourselves to God and then imbue suffering with hope through prayer.

The mission of the Catholic Church, which it has implemented according to its capabilities, is to denounce injustice, racial exclusivity, religious intolerance, negation of the fact that man is created in the image of God, and the abrogation of the rights of a nation to a home and homeland. As the pastors and faithful have done in the past, so it is today.

6. There have been enough criminals who have shown what insanity and inhumanity can do. This is not merely a question of the horrors of the repressive systems and leadership of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; the aspirations and horrors of Ante Pavelic and the Ustasha, blind adherents to a national idea, whose path led to ties with the ideologies of Nazism and fascism, far from the Christian foundations and heritage of our nation, plunging the entire Croatian nation into a tragedy of suffering and humiliation; or of the ideological blindness and atrocities of the partisans and communist authorities under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, who until the present – under the pretext of antifascism – have not wanted to recognize and accept responsibility for the inhumanity that goes hand in hand with Nazism. Here, we confront the

mystery of evil.

As believers, we are in a place where we witness the trampling of faith in God and faith in man, as the Servant of God John Paul II noted at the former Brzezinka concentration camp on June 7, 1979.

In this connection, Pope Benedict XVI recently said the following: "The Nazi concentration camps, like all other death camps, can be considered extreme symbols of evil, of the hell that comes to earth when man forgets God, and when he is replaced, usurping from him the right to decide what is good and what is evil, to give life and or to take life. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not confined to death camps. It is rather the culmination of an extensive and widespread reality of often nebulous boundaries. ... On the one hand, there are philosophies and ideologies, but also on an increasing scale, ways of thinking and acting that extol the freedom of man as the only principle, as an alternative to God, and thus transform man into a god, whose system of behavior is of an arbitrary nature. On the other hand, we note the saints, who, practicing the gospel of love, make reason of their hope. They show the true face of God who is Love, and at the same time, the true face of man, created in the image and likeness of God. Dear brothers and sisters, let us pray to the Virgin Mary, to help us all, above all us priests, to be as holy as these heroic witnesses of the faith and of dedication, even to martyrdom. This is the only way to provide a credible and comprehensive answer to the human and spiritual questions, which give rise to the deep crisis of the contemporary world: love in truth" (Benedict XVI, homily prior to the recitation of the Angelus, Sunday, August 9, 2009).

7. Looking at the events that marked this region during the second half of the previous century, listening to the whisper of the victims, we sense that what bound them to the world was hope. This hope was their last resort, amidst the darkness of the hearts of those seeking to wrench it from their lives. Although they did not share a common religion, hope bound them together. The joint legacy of believers from the nation of Israel and Christians was able to create today's psalm, to unite them in hope: "To thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in thee I trust" (Ps 25:1-2). This was also the content of the episcopal motto chosen by the Blessed Aloysius: In thee, Lord, I trust! Hope provides sufficient strength for martyrdom while despair tends towards criminality.

Children and young people require educational materials and teachers who will build a culture of peace upon the truth. This is also sought by the victims of Jasenovac, as well as by the victims of other places of execution in Croatia. The Church will support and promote every effort and attempt to provide insight into the burden of the past that also opens the future, with the awareness that remembrance is necessary. Nonetheless, remembrance that is not truthful ceases to be remembrance. Remembrance poisoned by lies negates its essence and perpetrates violence against the victims.

For us Christians, the *mysterium iniquitatis* is transformed through Christ's cross into the *mysterium caritatis*. God himself descended into the hell of suffering and suffers together with us. Such places teach us that evil does not have the last word. We are not here to reopen wounds but to see in the wounds a new person, transformed for eternity, responsible for the suffering of his neighbors.

In conclusion, I return to the words of the psalm which today, from the hearts of hundreds of priests of the Archdiocese of Zagreb, send a message definitively rejecting the negation of God and man: "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies" (Ps 25:10).

Amen.