The great Apostle Saint Paul, preacher of the Cross of Our Lord, recounts (in the Acts of the Apostles 17:22-23) how, having gone one day to the city of Athens, he cast his eyes on an altar which had as a title: To the Unknown God. I cast my eyes, he says, on an altar dedicated to an unknown God. And from that he takes occasion to preach to the Athenians about who this unknown God is that they worship. O beloved and most dear Athenians, this great preacher of the Cross said to them, this God whom you still do not know and whom I would like to make completely known to you is none other than God the almighty Father, who sent his Son here below on earth to take up our human nature. In that way, though he was God as his Father, of the same nature and essence as him, this divine Son nevertheless suffered death, and death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8), in order to satisfy the justice of God his Father, (who was) justly indignant against humans following the sin of our first parents, sin which, without doubt, has caused the eternal death of all. The Athenians, as the majority of persons at that time, recognized several gods, but in the end they confessed that among all of them there had been one whom they did not know.

The great Apostle, therefore, took as his subject this inscription in order to make for them an excellent sermon, giving them to understand with admirable terms who be this God about whom they were still ignorant. As for me, my most dear Sisters, having conversed with you here a little while, I have cast the eyes of my consideration on the title that I have seen not there on the altar
of the Athenians, but on that incomparable altar on which our Lord and Master is offered for us to God his Father in a sacrifice most agreeable and with an unparalleled gentleness, the altar which is none other than the Cross, which for all times since has been honored as the most precious and adorable. Now, having considered the title placed on it there, I have thought, in imitation of the preacher of the Cross, that I should look into another subject as the foundation of what I should say to you. It is not that I wish to speak to you about an unknown God, for thanks to his goodness we do know him; but certainly, I could speak well of a poorly known God. We do not, therefore, make him known to you; but we do make known again this God so loveable who died for us.

Oh what a useful thing it is, this recognition! For truly, according to several, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had had some excuse for not having recognized the divine Majesty, since they had not known him as clearly as we do, we who are beyond excuse, having learned from God himself that he is, by the divine mouth of Our Lord who is, as he has told us, one same God with his Father. Christians will be inexcusable (Romans 1:20) for not having loved him and served him with all their heart, since they have been so well taught how much he is loveable and how dearly he has loved them in giving his life for them (cf. Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2).

No, I do not intend to speak to you, my dear Sisters, about how many ignominies, sorrows, afflictions, anguishes, reprimands, affronts, and scorns our divine Master suffered in death, nor less to narrate to you the venomous cruelty with which the Jews attached him to the cross. For you know that I have always made you to understand that there is little consideration of that in the Passion of our Savior, and that on which you should least stop yourselves, since the affection of compassion about his sufferings is the least useful. He himself seems to wish to inculcate this to us when he says to the women who had followed him to no longer weep over him, but for themselves (Luke 23:27-28). If we have tears, let us cry them most simply, for we should know not to cast them on a worthier subject; but let us stop ourselves there, passing on to some more useful considerations according to which the suffering of our Lord requires.

Therefore, I take up my own and consider the title that is posted above the cross. Oh how admirable it is! I am nearly ravished in considering it: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews (John 19:19). Who would ever have thought that words so holy would have been pronounced by the miserable mouth of so wicked a man as Pilate? However, they are quite true, and Our Lord confirms this for all in his Passion, as we will come to see in what follows of our discourse. It is remarkable how the Jews spoke such beautiful words at the death of our Savior, seeing that they did not intend them and said them maliciously and with wicked intention. What more beautiful and truer statement can be pronounced, than that from the more wicked among all men, that miserable Caiaphas: It is necessary that one man die (meaning, a man more excellent than among all men), for fear that the others not perish, so that all people not perish (John 11: 49,50). And the Jews: Let his blood be poured out on us and on our children (Matthew 27:25) -- which comes to be in the person of several among them, as in the conversion of the Apostles and of other disciples who were their children. Pilate, having written the title of the cross -- What I have written, I have written, he says (John 19:22)-- it is thus, reconfirming this truth.
But what do these divine words wish to signify? First, Jesus is that same as saying Savior. Second, of Nazareth, flourishing city, flourishes. And in the third place, it is said that Our Lord is King -- three qualities which are extremely well-suited to him.

First of all, he is Savior. Oh how true this is! He is Savior not only of men but also of Angels. Everyone obtains the salvation of the divine Goodness, and has it in virtue of the Death and Passion of Jesus Christ, for from all eternity he projects this merciful thought that he would die for all (Jeremiah 29:11; 31:3; cf. Introduction to the Devout Life, part 5, chapter 14). But it is necessary to confess that men have a subject of an inexplicable consolation in this Death and Passion of Our Lord, for however much he is Savior of the Angels he is not, however, their Redeemer (cf. Oeuvres IX:260), but is that for men. In as much as the Angels had sinned they were at the same time confirmed in their malice by the voluntary election that they made of evil and of that which would be disagreeable to God; so that since then there was no more hope for them to be able to detach themselves from it. Since they had chosen sin, they were rendered its slaves (John 8:34; Romans 6:16; 2 Peter 2:19). They were fixed and attached by that fashion to the perdition that never more would it be possible for them to detach themselves. They served themselves badly by their frank disposition against the divine will, which is why this frank disposition has been made slave of infernal pains for ever. But since man had eaten of the protected fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17; 3:6), Our Lord, meaning the second Person of the holy Trinity, resolved to come and ransom this poor man at the price of his most precious blood, dressing himself in human nature which he unites inseparably to his divine Person in order to render himself capable of suffering and dying as he did.

Oh what thought more suave and agreeable than this can be said, what joy, what sweetness of heart, what delectation must this truth cause in man, that Our Lord is his Redeemer and that he obtains life from him! Life has been given to him so that he might give it to each one and that all would have it from him as he had it from his Father (John 5:24-26; 6:58). It is not of the corporeal life that we intend to speak, for none could doubt that it is the spiritual life. Now, Our Lord possesses a life that is not common and petite, but a superabundant life (John 10:10), to the end that each one of men participates in it and lives from this same life, which is that of grace, all perfect and all loveable. But for us to acquire this life, Our Lord has purchased it for us at the price of his blood (1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18,19) and the lance in his side. Therefore, our life is not ours, but his; we are no longer to ourselves, but to him. Since he has purchased it for us, we are his slaves. What blessed slavery! It is necessary, therefore, no longer to live for ourselves but for him (2 Corinthians 5:15; cf. Treatise on the Love of God, book 7, chapter 8). Oh how powerful this reason is for us to dedicate ourselves totally to the service of this celestial love by which we have been so dearly favored, and if I dare to say, below the Angels themselves.

Let us see now how Our Lord shows himself truly Savior and Redeemer of men by his Death and Passion. The Jewish felons having nearly absolved their barbarous and unprecedented cruelty on this most gentle Lamb (Jeremiah 11:19), having attached him to the cross, and vomited from their miserable mouths several abominable blasphemies against his divine Majesty, our Savior takes it upon himself to cry these divine words as in thwarting these injustices and unworthy blasphemies: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing (Luke 23:34). My God, how admirable are these words! Consider, I beg you, the gentleness of the heart of our Master, and see how charity seeks ways to arrive at the goal of its expectation, which is the glory
of God and the salvation of the neighbor. My Father, cries out our dear Savior, as if he had wished to say: I am your Son, resolve that your are my Father, and as a result that you would refuse me nothing. And what is it that he asks? Nothing for himself, for he has forgotten his very self. He suffers much more than he could ever imagine, but even then he does not think of himself nor of what he is enduring; it goes contrary to our own way of thinking when we have our own suffering and forget nearly all others. Even a toothache deprives us of the memory of what is around us, in as much as we love ourselves and are attached to this miserable flesh.

Men think nearly all their life about what they have to do for their death, as if they could establish their final choices to the end that they be well understood concerning what they leave after themselves, whether to their children or others who would inherit their goods. And for that, many make their last will in full health, fearing that the effort of mortal sorrows would deprive them of the means of manifesting their intentions upon their departure. But Our Lord knowing that he would put forth his life and would guard it as and when he desired it (John 10:17,18), remits to make his testament at his death, a testament that he hardens and seals even before it is written and pronounced.

Men, in order to show that what is written is their last will and that they intend that it be thus, seal it with their stamp, but they do not apply it until after everything has been finished. The Savior not wishing to pronounce his testament except on the cross and a little before dying, nevertheless applies his stamp and seals his testament before all other things. His stamp is nothing other than himself, seeing that he had said to Solomon speaking in the person of the devout soul: Put me as a stamp on your heart and as a seal on your arm (Canticle of Canticles 8:6). He applies this sacred stamp when he institutes the most holy and adorable Sacrament of the altar, which he calls his new testament (Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 16:25), a Sacrament which contains in itself divinity and humanity, altogether and entirely the sacred Person of Our Lord.