

Holy Thursday April 13, 2017

Holy Thursday is the most prayerful and profound of all religious observances, saving only the Easter Vigil. The evening Holy Thursday Liturgy, marks the end of Lent and the beginning of the sacred "Triduum" or the sacred three days of Holy Week, which culminates in the Easter Vigil, and concludes at Vespers on the evening of Easter day. The Mass begins in the evening, because Passover began at sundown; it commemorates Our Lord's institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper. It also stresses the importance of the humility of service manifested by Jesus during his final meal. The ceremony consists of washing the feet of the apostles by Jesus as well as in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament while the main altar is stripped of all decorations and kept bare. The action of the Church on this night also witnesses to the Church's esteem for Christ's Body present in the consecrated Host in the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, carried in solemn procession to the flower-bedecked Altar of Repose, where it will remain "entombed" until the communion service on Good Friday. No Mass will be celebrated again in the Church until the Easter Vigil proclaims the Resurrection. Through this Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament by the people during the night, the church remains with the Lord during His agony at Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

On Holy Thursday the church celebrates the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Christ and the institution of the consecrated priesthood. Today the church recollects how during the Last Supper Jesus shared with the disciples the official Passover meal where he is the self-offered Passover Victim. Today every ordained priest offers this same sacrifice, following Christ's authority and command, in exactly the same way. The Last Supper was also Christ's farewell meal with his assembled disciples, some of whom would betray, desert or deny him before the sun rose again. But the heart of Jesus is filled with love for them which makes him address them as his own friends. He tells them about his future sufferings and how he would be left alone but he will not leave them orphans at any time. He washes the feet of his disciples to explain to the disciples the meaning of service.

On Holy Thursday morning there is also a special Mass in Cathedral Churches, celebrated by the bishop and as many priests of the diocese as can attend, because it is a solemn observance of Christ's institution of the priesthood at the Last Supper. At this "Chrism Mass" the bishop also blesses the Oil of Chrism used for Baptism, Confirmation and Anointing of the sick or dying. The bishop may

wash the feet of twelve of the priests, to symbolize Christ's washing the feet of His Apostles, the first priests. This practice is of recent origin. In the early church this day was celebrated simply, with a general communion taken by both the clergy and lay members of the church, and marked the date when penitents had their public reconciliation with the community. In 1956, the Roman Catholic Church officially instituted a morning liturgy service for the consecration of holy oils in preparation for both the coming year and for new baptisms and a second evening liturgy service to be held for the actual commemoration of the first Eucharist. At this time, the hosts for the next days' Good Friday services are also consecrated and priests renewed their commitment to the service to the church by the washing the feet of the disciples. The evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday is a beautiful and joyful celebration. During the singing of the Gloria, the church bells are rung and then remain silent until the Easter Vigil of Holy Saturday night.

In this ceremony of the Washing of the Feet, we remember how in this last great act of Jesus, he shows himself to be totally at their service. He kneels down to perform a menial task of a slave for them to teach them the true meaning of authority. This act is repeated by the main celebrant of the day, indicating the importance of service in the church. This is a reminder of how Jesus in the gospel spoke of power, authority which is always connected with service. On the evening of this Thursday the Disciples had gathered around the table for the Last Supper and shared the gift of Jesus for them namely his own body and blood given in the form of a simple meal. After this we move into the darkness of the vigil where we keep watch with Jesus in Gethsemane with those first disciples as Jesus prepares himself for the final sacrifice on the Cross.

On this day Jesus prays to the Father for the Church as recorded by John in his Gospel. She is born of the prayer of Jesus and through the preaching of the Apostles, who make known God's name to them and introduces men and women into the fellowship of love with God. Jesus in fact prays that the preaching of the disciples will continue for all time that it will gather together men and women who know God and the one whom he has sent, his Son Jesus Christ. He prays that men and women may be led to faith and, through faith, to love and finally to a total unity. He asks the Father that all those who believe in him may be one in the Holy Trinity. Twice the Lord says during the last supper that this unity should make the world believe in his mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God. He speaks

to them of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church who will be their instructor and guide.

On this Holy Thursday is dedicated to Priests as we remember the institution of the Priesthood by Jesus and imparts to them his mission to proclaim the kingdom. A Priest is a mediator between God and Man, the one who offers a true sacrifice in acknowledgment of God's supreme dominion over human beings in expiation for their sins. Through his mediation, a priest communicates from God to the people and from the people to God. Christ, who is God and man, is the first and greatest priest of the New Covenant. He is the eternal high priest who offered himself once and for all on the Cross, a victim of infinite value, and has entered into the Holy of Holies to bring reconciliation to humanity. Making his disciples partakers in his Eternal Priesthood, he called on them to repeat the sacrifice he offered in his sacred memory. Today all priests and bishops trace their ordination to the Apostles as they celebrate the Eucharist. Their second essential priestly power, to forgive sins, was conferred by Christ on Easter Sunday, when he told the Apostles, "For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained". All the Christian faithful, however, also share in the priesthood by their baptismal character. They are enabled to offer themselves in sacrifice with Christ through the Eucharistic liturgy. They offer the Mass in the sense that they internally unite themselves with the outward offering made by the ordained priest alone.

During the time of Jesus, the last supper or the Paschal meal was in celebration of that sacred Jewish feast of the Passover. God commanded to Moses and Aaron to tell Israel to commemorate the Passover. Each family had to get an unblemished lamb and slaughter it and its blood had to be applied to the doorposts and the lamb roasted and eaten. They had to eat standing, with travel clothes worn as if on flight. Then the Angel of Death would pass over the houses of those who obey God's orders and their first born shall be spared from death. But the Lamb of God that God the Father sent into the world is his only Son, Jesus Christ, whose body and blood we share. On this day Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist for the sake of humanity so that we may eat his body and drink his blood and thus have eternal life. In this meal, Jesus tells his disciples that he is truly present, body and blood, and his divinity is manifested in it. He is the God-man who chooses the simple means of a meal to remain with the humanity forever and he says: "Do this in memory of me."

The Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples contains many significant principles, and continues to be an important part of Christian religious practice. This is described in detail in three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. The earliest narrative comes from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Here we have some of the life-changing highlights, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. First, Jesus predicts his immediate suffering and it will be His final meal prior to his entering into his Passion. Second, Jesus gives His followers his eternal presence namely his personal presence as he gives them his body and blood sacrificed on behalf of all mankind. He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'. Third, Jesus provides a very important principle for living a Christian life: the principle of service. He washes their feet and shows the means of service. Finally, Jesus provides hope to his followers as he tells them: "and I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel".

After the Last Supper, Jesus Christ willfully and obediently allowed himself to be brutally sacrificed on the cross. His death on the cross is the completion of the sacrifice he offered at the Last Supper. He did this to reconcile each of us to God by paying the debt of our sins, which we could never do on our own power. In return, Jesus makes a simple request, remember this act of love he performed on our behalf and instructs his disciples to love one another. Jesus Christ did not have to die for us. He did, however, because He values every life on earth and wants to see each of us become part of the mystical body of Christ. Jesus taught at the Last Supper called his disciples to live a faithful life while here on earth by serving others in love.

Pope Benedict XVI in his homily at the Mass of the Lord's Supper in April 2010 says: At the centre of the Church's worship is the notion of "sacrament". This means that it is not primarily we who act, but God comes first to meet us through his action, he looks upon us and he leads us to himself. Another striking feature is this: God touches us through material things, through gifts of creation that he takes up into his service, making them instruments of the encounter between us and himself. There are four elements in creation on which the world of sacraments is built: water, bread, wine and olive oil. Water, as the basic element and fundamental condition of all life, is the essential sign of the act in which, through baptism, we become Christians and are born to new life. While water is the vital element everywhere, and thus represents the shared access of all people

to rebirth as Christians, the other three elements belong to the culture of the Mediterranean region. In other words, they point towards the concrete historical environment in which Christianity emerged. God acted in a clearly defined place on the earth, he truly made history with men. On the one hand, these elements are gifts of creation, and on the other, they also indicate the locality of the history of God with us. They are a synthesis between creation and history: gifts of God that always connect us to those parts of the world where God chose to act with us in historical time, where he chose to become one of us.

Within these given elements there is a further gradation. Bread has to do with everyday life. It is the fundamental gift of life day by day. Wine has to do with feasting, with the fine things of creation, in which, at the same time, the joy of the redeemed finds particular expression. Olive oil has a wide range of meaning. It is nourishment, it is medicine, it gives beauty, it prepares us for battle and it gives strength. Kings and priests are anointed with oil, which is thus a sign of dignity and responsibility, and likewise of the strength that comes from God. Even the name that we bear as “Christians” contains the mystery of the oil. The word “Christians”, in fact, by which Christ’s disciples were known in the earliest days of Gentile Christianity, is derived from the word “Christ” as the Acts of the Apostles tells us and the Greek translation of the word “Messiah”, which means “anointed one”. To be a Christian is to come from Christ, to belong to Christ, to the anointed one of God, to whom God granted kingship and priesthood. It means belonging to him whom God himself anointed – not with material oil, but with the One whom the oil represents: with his Holy Spirit. Olive oil is thus in a very particular way a symbol of the total co-penetration of the man Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

Again, Pope Benedict XVI tells us to return to Jesus’ words – this is eternal life: that they know you and the One whom you have sent. Knowledge of God becomes eternal life. Clearly "knowledge" here means something more than mere factual knowledge, as, for example, when we know that a famous person has died or a discovery was made. Knowing, in the language of sacred Scripture, is an interior becoming one with the other. Knowing God, knowing Christ, always means loving him, becoming, in a sense, one with him by virtue of that knowledge and love. Our life becomes authentic and true life, and thus eternal life, when we know the One who is the source of all being and all life. And so Jesus’ words become a summons: let us become friends of Jesus, let us try to know him all the more. Let us live in dialogue with him. Let us learn from him how to live aright, let

us be his witnesses. Then we become people who love and then we act aright. Then we are truly alive.

At the end of the Holy Thursday Eucharist the Altars are stripped, the decorations are taken away, the Church is left absolutely bare and it will be bare in that way for the whole of Good Friday, right up to the beginning of the vigil before Easter. It is if we have come at this point to a moment of real nakedness. We're down to basics; we have to face the most essential facts about us; our need, our poverty. Therefore there is no time for having flowers and decorations. We take away all the inessentials: bare walls, a bare table and ourselves left face to face with the terrifying reality of Good Friday.

Dear friends, we have been listening to the reflections on Holy Thursday liturgy as we enter into the Easter Triduum. We have seen Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, instituting the Priesthood and Instituting the Eucharist. Through this simple form of meal, the bread and wine, he will remain with us forever.

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