

Reflections for Holy Thursday March 24, 2016

Dear Friends, Today is Holy Thursday which marks the end of the Lenten season. Holy Thursday is the most prayerful and profound of all religious observances of Christians, saving only the Easter Vigil. With the evening Holy Thursday Liturgy, we begin the Sacred "Triduum" or the sacred three days of the Holy Week, which culminates in the Easter Vigil, and concludes with Vespers on Easter Sunday Evening. On Holy Thursday we gather with the Disciples around the Lord's Table to celebrate the Last Supper and to thank God for the holy gifts he gave us on that occasion – the Eucharist, his own body and blood which would be sacrificed on Calvary the next day; and the Ministerial Priesthood, in which he choose and consecrated men to be good and holy shepherds to share in his sacrificial ministry to God's People. He showed us his example of humility by washing the feet of his disciples and gave the assurance of his peace. He gave them his new command to love one another and finally announced the gift of the Holy Spirit. At the Eucharist tonight the Gloria is sung as it is a joyful occasion before the gloom of Good Friday. It is indeed a joyful and glorious occasion because on this night our Lord gives us himself and promises to remain with us forever.

On Holy Thursday Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist at the upper room during his Last Supper with his disciples. This special meal was the commemoration of that sacred Jewish feast of the Passover. The Book of Exodus refers to this celebration under the guidance of Moses and Aaron. They were told to inform each family to get a year old unblemished lamb and prepare a meal with it. They were to apply its blood to the doorposts, while the lamb was roasted and eaten by the family. They had to have their meal standing on their feet 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 would be spared from death. Wherever people disobeyed the command their first born was killed. This had been the most sacred of all Jewish rituals and it continues even to this day.

Holy Thursday is important to Christians as it is the commemoration of the institution of the Holy Eucharist where Jesus invites us to eat his body and drink his blood. This day also stresses the importance of the humility of service manifested by Jesus during the meal. The ceremony consists of washing the feet of the apostles by Jesus and the priest takes over this role. During the ceremony of the Washing of the Feet, we remember how Jesus offered himself to be totally at their service. John tells us how Jesus knelt down at the feet of the disciples to perform a menial task of a slave to teach them the real

meaning of authority which is service. This act is repeated by the main celebrant of the day, indicating the importance of service in the church.

On this day Jesus prays to the Father for the Church in his High Priestly Prayer. He prays for the disciples as they are Father's gift to him, he prays for the world and he prays for each one of us. Jesus prays that the preaching of the disciples may continue for all time and that it may 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 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 who will be their instructor and guide in the church. He reminds them that they did not choose him but he and the Father chose them from all eternity. He promised them the Holy Spirit who will help them to preach and reveal the errors of the world.

Holy Thursday is dedicated to Priests as we remember the institution of the Priesthood by Jesus. A Priest is a mediator between God and Man, the one who offers sacrifice in acknowledgment of God's supreme dominion over human beings and 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 between God and humanity. Making his disciples partakers in his Eternal Priesthood, Jesus 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 of Christ by their baptism. 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.

On Holy Thursday the church prayerfully remembers the institution of the Holy Eucharist. At the Last Supper Jesus took the bread and wine and shared it with his disciples. This is described in detail in three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew tells us: chapter 26, 26-29

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Paul provides us with the earliest detailed account of the Lord's Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist. He tells them how Lord Jesus at the Last Supper took bread and broke it and gave it to the disciples saying "This is my Body which is for you. Do it in remembrance of me." He did the same with the cup of wine after the meal telling them: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. As often you do this, do it in remembrance of me." Paul tells the Corinthian Church that they are participating in the body and blood of Christ and not their own meal. He informs the church that the bread becomes the Body of Jesus and the wine becomes his Blood. Paul instructs the people of Corinth to make Eucharist the centre of their lives. This was the time when the church at Corinth had problems concerning unity, mainly due to their economic status. When the Christians came together to celebrate the Eucharist they also had their meal together as a single community. The problem in Corinth was that the rich would go ahead and eat without waiting for others and not even making sure that the poor in the congregation had eaten or even brought food with them. The poor probably made up a large portion of the congregation, many of them slaves. By eating without the poor, the rich showed their utter disdain for their brothers and sisters, an offence against Christian unity. Paul tells them that there must be no division in Christ's Community as he shared one bread and one cup and formed a true community. They have their own houses to eat and drink and satisfy themselves. But at the Lords meal they are all one community, members of one Body. They ought to share with each other their meal and communion. He tells them that we are truly united to Christ in his sacrifice.

Eucharist means thanksgiving and blessing. We express our gratitude to God for all the good things God has given us in Jesus and we offer him our gratitude in the form of Bread and Wine. At the Last Supper Jesus gave thanks to the Father, for the mission, for the disciples, for the church, for the universe itself. Every gathering in the church as a community is an act of thanksgiving. Here Christ reminds us of the many gifts we have received in life and we thank God for them. Gratitude is the expression of the heart. In his High Priestly prayer Jesus thanks the Father for the disciples and prays for them. He also speaks of

the choice of the disciples by the Father and given them as a gift to Jesus. He speaks of their mission in the world and the guiding of their life by the Holy Spirit. He also makes a special prayer for their protection.

Eucharist means a Blessing. Blessing is an important aspect of the Eucharist – Berecca. Blessing is the prayer of praise and glorification for all the Lord God has done for us in Jesus. It is a meal shared by the community in the name of Jesus. It is a sacrificial meal, meaning it is an offering to God as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. For the Jews blessing was the same as our offertory prayer: Blessed are you... "Blessed are you for the gift," is same as to say, dear God kindly bless this gift and bless us too. Jesus uses here the symbol of a simple meal to show his presence to us and chooses to remain in the form of simple bread and wine, a poor person's meal. Here the emphasis is more on the community dimension of the celebration of the Eucharist. It is a communal celebration where we share in the one bread and the one cup. A priest as the leader of the group only presides and leads the community in the offering of the sacrifice. Every Christian participating in the priesthood of Christ offers the sacrifice. The words used are important: "take" indicates the presentation of the gifts; "bless" involves the Eucharistic prayer; "break" indicates the fraction for each; "give" means communion or distribution; "sharing" involves the entire community present. Just as Jesus accepted the gift from God, Eucharist is the place where Jesus gives us his life and grace. He allows himself to be broken and shared.

Eucharist is a communal sacrificial meal, celebrated by the church and offered by the community of believers along with the priest, to the heavenly Father together with Jesus as a memorial of the Paschal mystery of Christ. It is the sacrifice offered to God for the remission of sins and as an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving to God for what he has done for us. Eucharist is essentially and of its very nature a community action in which every person present is an active participant and the priest presides over it. We are here, on the one hand, recalling what makes us Christians in the first place - our identification with the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that identification with Jesus is expressed not through a one-to-one relationship with him but in a community relationship with him present in all those who call themselves Christians. We relate to him through his Risen Body, which is the whole community bearing his name. Thus there is no place in Christianity for individualism. It is a horizontal faith: we go to God with and through those around us. That is the reason why Paul asks the community to share the meal together because Jesus broke the bread and shared, saying that it is his body.

Same thing he did with wine, saying it is his blood. Through this sharing we become one with him.

Eucharist is a memorial. It is celebrated in remembrance of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the remembrance of the sacrifice which Jesus offered at the Last Supper and completed it on Mount Calvary, where he gives his Body and Blood and life itself, for the sake of humanity. This is the memorial sacrifice we celebrate every day. At the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples to perform this sacrifice in his memory. It is also a reminder to God of all the things he has done to us in Jesus. In reality God does not need a reminder. He knows everything. What it means is that it is a praise and thanksgiving for the wonders he has worked for us in Jesus and we tell him that. The word used here is ANAMNESIS. This memorial as stated in the Letter to the Hebrews tells us of the sacrifice. Therefore Paul says in Romans: "therefore I beg you because of the mercies of God offer your bodies as a sacrifice, holy, loving, pleasing to Christ."

Eucharist is a communion. It means sharing and being together. Here it is the sharing in the life of God. Man feels a sense of worthlessness and depends on God and surrenders to him. The initiative is from God as it was in the covenant of the Old Testament. Here a person totally gives to God his life and all that he has. It is a sharing in the life of the Trinity and thus entering fully into God's life. It is a sacrificial surrender where a person willingly offers himself to God. In the Eucharistic Communion, there is an important social dimension. Here the group shares the food and drink with one another without any discrimination. It is linked with purification as shown by Jesus in the washing of the feet of his disciples. It signifies reconciliation and forgiveness. Ultimately, Communion is sharing in the life of Christ.

In the Eucharist we have some of the life-changing highlights, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. First, Jesus predicts his immediate suffering and this would be his final meal before entering into his Passion. Second, Jesus offers 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 of Christian living, the principle of service. He washes the feet of the disciples and gives them the example of humility and 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 wilfully 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. For Jesus the hour has finally come. Judas has gone to betray him. His soul was heavy with grief and suffering for the sinfulness of man. To support him as he pours out his agony to the heavens, he takes with him Peter, James and John, the three who had shared with him in his glorious transfiguration. His request to his friends is simple enough, to pray with him. Today Jesus is asking you and I to stay with him and pray with him. Through the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament during the night, the People of God remain with the Lord during his agony at Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

Dear friends, we remained with Jesus as he washed the feet of his disciples, instituted the Priesthood and Holy Eucharist. Through this simple meal, consisting of bread and wine, he chooses to remain with us forever. You have been listening to the reflections on Holy Thursday liturgy as we enter into the Easter Triduum.

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