

The Sacred Triduum: Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper

April 13, 2017 7:00 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Our 40 days of Lent, now completed, have been for the purpose of preparing us for these 3 days that we refer to as the Sacred Triduum. We use three separate names----Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday----but these three days form one major celebration of everything that is sacred and holy to us as Catholic Christians---we who are followers of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

This evening, we give thanks for three of the most treasured gifts Jesus has given to the Church: 1) first of all we celebrate the Gift of Himself in the Holy Eucharist---the source and summit of our Faith, and the very source of our spiritual nourishment and strength; 2) secondly, we celebrate Jesus' gift of Priesthood, those of us who thru the Sacrament of Holy Orders are given the authority to bring about Jesus' real and true Presence in the Eucharist at every Holy Mass; 3) finally, we celebrate the mandate that Jesus gives to all of us, through the Eucharist, to give loving service to others in the Name of Jesus.

At the end of this evening's Mass, after processing with the Eucharist out of the Cathedral to the Altar of Repose, we will depart in silence, prayerfully waiting until the Triduum's observance resumes tomorrow with Good Friday of the Lord's Passion, to be followed on Holy Saturday night with the joyful celebration of the Solemn Vigil of Easter.

We've just heard God's holy Word for this Holy Thursday evening. We heard the powerful passage from the Book of Exodus reminding us of the original Passover event when God's chosen people were spared by the Blood of the Lamb spread on the lintels of their homes' doorways, as they ate their meal in haste, ready to begin their 40-year pilgrimage through the desert eventually being led to the Promised Land.

The Feast of Passover is the most important holy day in the Jewish calendar, and as it happens, our Jewish elder sisters and brothers in the Faith are in the very midst of this year's 8-day Passover celebration, having begun this past Monday and will conclude this coming Tuesday, and we rejoice with them in these holy days.

And as we heard in our Gospel passage, St. John tells us that Jesus was gathered with His apostles just before the Feast of Passover. In a turn of words, St. John points out that as they were preparing to celebrate Pass-over, Jesus was ready to pass-from this world to the Father.

But more importantly, St. John gets inside Jesus' Head and Heart, so to speak, and gives us four very special insights into what Jesus was thinking and feeling as He was having what we call the Last Supper---the final meal He would have in this world and an opportunity He would have for one last instruction to His Apostles before His mission was completed.

First of all, St. John tells us that "*Jesus knew that His hour had come*". In the Gospel of John, he uses that phrase "Jesus' hour" many times. For St. John it was a phrase that had many important meanings, much more than a particular time on a clock. It referred to the very reason why Jesus was born and why He had been sent into the world by His Father; it referred to Jesus' mission of reconciling and redeeming the world---the mission of restoring the balance in humanity's relationship with God; 3) it referred to the "moment" to which everything else had led; these next three holy and sacred days were Jesus' "time". So, as Jesus sat at table with His apostles, He was very aware that His "now" had come.

Secondly, St. John also tells us: "*He loved His own in the world and He loved them to the end.*" For Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, "*His own*" was not some exclusive group; no, "*His own*" included ALL people for ALL time, before, during and after His earthly life---including those who believed in Him, those who put Him to death, and those who paid no attention at all---including all of us here, and our whole world in 2017. For Jesus, to "*love to the end*" meant being ready and willing to lay down His life in the most gruesome and humiliating way imaginable.

Thirdly, St. John also tells us that "*the devil had already induced Judas...to hand Him over*". Since the beginning of time, and as he always will be, the Devil has been the ultimate antagonist toward God; but Jesus knew that in this, His "hour", the Devil was doomed to defeat.

And finally, St. John tells us that Jesus was "*fully aware that the Father had put everything into His power, AND that he had come from God and was returning to God.*" Jesus knew exactly Who He was, from where He had come, what His mission was, and to where and to Whom He would be returning---to the right Hand of His Heavenly Father. That is true self-knowledge, or self-awareness.

And we all know, the more “self-aware” we are, the more confident we can be in carrying out our life’s responsibilities. What St. John helps us to know about Jesus as He was prepared for His “Hour” are the critically important things we need to know about ourselves in our spiritual lives. And among the most important is that we need to know who we are---where we have come from---to Whom we are going. We are the beloved sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father; we have been given the gift of life because that was God’s will, and through the Sacrament of Baptism, we have been given the gift of salvation and new/eternal life in Jesus; and we know that at the end of our lives in this world, we will go on to live eternally and we pray, with God’s grace and mercy, our “eternity” will be with God in Heaven. So, when we know who we are, from where we have come, and to Whom we are going, we too can be self-aware and confident in the way we live our lives, as long as we remain united with the Body of Christ.

With Jesus being mindful and aware of all those realities, He had one final opportunity to impress upon His apostles what He most wanted them to remember. Rather than to instruct them with 1,000 more words, Jesus decided to put His instruction into a powerful demonstration. As we just heard, He silently got up, took off His outer garment, and began to wash His disciples’ feet. I’m certain that all of them felt uncomfortable; Peter voiced his objections, but Jesus quickly put him in his place. And then, at the end, Jesus asked a very important question: *“Do you realize what I have done for you?”*

And so, that’s the question I’ll ask of all of us. Do we realize what Jesus has done for us? How many Lents have you lived through? I know that I’ve lived many Lents, and I am still coming to realize each year more and more what Jesus has done for us in the way He has won for us the gift of salvation through His suffering, death, burial and resurrection.

We may never be able to realize completely what Jesus has done for us; but what is most important is that we ponder it---that we grapple with it---that we too know, with Peter, that we’re not worthy for Jesus to wash my feet. And we’re not worthy to be forgiven for our lifetime of sins. As we pray before receiving the Holy Eucharist at every Mass: “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof; but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” It’s not a matter of our worthiness; it’s a matter of Jesus’ “love for His own...to the end.”

As St. Paul told us in this evening’s Second Reading from his Letter to the Corinthians reflecting on this same Last Supper, that because Jesus knew that “His hour” had come and that He was about to “pass from this world to the Father”, He also found the way to remain with His Church through the Gift of the Eucharist as our spiritual nourishment, and as a living

memorial to His Presence. In anticipation of what would happen in the breaking, bruising, and beating of His Body, and the shedding of His Blood unto death, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said “*This is My Body that is for you*”; and He did the same with the cup, saying “*This cup is the new covenant in My Blood.*” And then He said: “*Do this in memory of Me.*”

What Jesus did at the Last Supper, and what He did on Calvary, are inextricably connected. As we say in one of our Memorial Acclamations: “When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death, O Lord, until You come again.”

But as we keep trying to answer Jesus’ question, whether we “realize what He has done for us”, we need at least to understand that Jesus did not give us the Eucharist for us to hoard, or for us to keep for ourselves. It’s not spiritual food to just make me comfortable and to mind my own spiritual business. The Eucharist is to help us to live as Jesus did.

The Eucharist is to help us not only to allow Jesus to wash our feet---to seek after Jesus’ continued cleansing us from our ongoing daily sins through the Sacrament of Penance; but the Eucharist is to give us the strength to do what is so hard for us human beings----to be humble enough and loving enough to wash one another’s feet in loving service in the Name of Jesus.

When Jesus asked that question of His apostles, he said: “*You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master’, and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the Master and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet.*”

Notice what Jesus said: Not “it would be nice if you would.....”; not “every once in a while please consider if you ,ight....”; NO! He said: “You OUGHT....You MUST.....I MANDATE you to.....wash one another’s feet. This rite of the Washing of the Feet is called the Mandatum, which comes from the Latin word meaning “mandate”---a command. For us who are disciples of Jesus, this is required, because loving service to those in need, especially the poor and the unjustly treated, is what must be the result of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ as our Food and Drink; living in Loving Service with others is what “Do this in memory of Me” means.

The Apostles were “ordained” as Jesus’ first priests to “do this”---to continue making Jesus Present in the Holy Eucharist. Only a properly ordained priest has the privilege, given through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, to make Christ Present in the Eucharist, to forgive sins in the Name of Jesus, and to be the “person of Christ” present in the world through his teaching, sanctifying and shepherding of God’s people, bringing them to Christ.

So we are faced this evening with three inter-related and solemn truths of our faith. 1) The Eucharist is not possible without the Priesthood. 2) The giving of Jesus' Body and Blood in the Eucharist and the death of Jesus' Body and Blood on Calvary are interconnected; we can not have one without the other. The Eucharist is the unbloody memorial of the one-time death of Jesus that continues to be effective in every Eucharist. 3) The Eucharist sustains us spiritually, but also requires us to reach out in loving service ---to wash one another's feet---in the Name of Christ. The Priesthood---the Eucharist---the Call to Loving Service are forever linked, and that which gives us all life.

On this Holy Thursday, as we begin another Sacred Triduum, and as we pray for a deeper love for Jesus and for one another, we keep trying to realize what Jesus has done for us. At the same time, we thank God for what Jesus has done, and continues to do, for us by faithfully and joyfully living our Faith in the world.

Jesus is the Model---the Teacher and Master. What He has done, so must we also do.

God bless you, now and always!