

Holy Thursday

Holy Rosary Cathedral

29 March 2018

Dear brothers who are celebrating the gift and mystery of the priesthood this evening; dear deacons, seminarians, consecrated women and men; and dear parishioners, visitors, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

Tonight's Liturgy reveals something profound about the mystery of Redemption. Our Mass recalls the great gifts of the Eucharist and the Priesthood instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper. That's why we are celebrating in white vestments and why we sang the Gloria with bells ringing. We are ever so grateful this evening for the marvels that the Lord works for us. And yet, our service will conclude with the stripping of the altar and a silent journey to Jesus' Agony in the Garden, as we contemplate the tragic events leading to his Crucifixion.

There, in the Garden of Olives, he experienced such acute suffering that it made him sweat blood (cf. Mt 26:38). Aware of his imminent death on the Cross, he felt immense anguish at the closeness of death. And his most intimate disciples fell asleep on him, just when he needed their solidarity and companionship the most.

Here Jesus fulfilled his mission as High Priest of the new and eternal Covenant, because the High Priest's role was to lift up human beings, with all their problems and sufferings, and to offer to God.

Through the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection he opened Heaven and eternal life for us.¹ Without Jesus' Death and Resurrection we would have no Eucharist to celebrate.

Tonight, then, we celebrate joyfully the continued presence of his Death and Resurrection in the glory of the Eucharist, yet never forgetting that this Gift was purchased at great price by the Blood of the Son of God (cf. Acts 17:11; 1 Cor 6:20; Gal 3:30).

Now, in light of this evening's Readings for this Mass, I want to offer you three short reflections on the Eucharist: first, the need for being cleansed as a condition for its worthy celebration; second, the meaning of the Eucharist as the new Passover, as the "memorial" of our Redemption; and third, what we, in turn, must do if the Eucharist is really to make a difference in our daily life.

1. Washing of Feet: Cleansing Our Sinfulness

Tonight's Gospel portrays with vivid imagery how the Lord deals with us as his friends, as those who try again and again to follow him faithfully but still failing – and not infrequently – in our weakness and despite our best intentions. Jesus uses the living parable of washing his disciples' dirty feet to remind us of the great truth of the need for purification before we can fully share in the gift of his Body and Blood.

¹ Cf. Benedict, General Audience (20 April 2011).

The feet – our lives – are stained with grime, our sins. The pollutants of the world cling to us as we make our way through life. By looking at our feet, we can calculate the toll this journey is taking. The wounds on our feet, our sprains and our weariness, are signs of how we have followed him. It has not been – and is not – easy.

What is so touching – indeed magnificent and consoling – is that Jesus himself washes us and cleanses us of all the dirt our feet have accumulated in following him.² “He washes our feet so that we may come to his table. . . . in the sacraments of purification – Baptism and the Sacrament of Penance – he is continually on his knees at our feet and carries out for us the service of a slave, the service of purification, making us capable of God.”³ Like the Apostles at the Last Supper, we need to be cleansed of our sins before we receive the Eucharist.

Jesus warns us of this necessity: “And you are clean, but not all of you”, he says (Jn 13:10). “But not all of you”: the obscure and terrifying mystery of rejection exists. God’s desire to purify and forgive us can be stifled. This becomes apparent with Judas’ act of betrayal. The Lord’s love knows no bounds but, like Judas, we can put a limit on it by not wanting to be loved, and by not loving. “It is pride that believes it has no need of any purification, that is closed to God’s saving goodness. It is

² Cf. Francis, Homily, Chrism Mass (2 April 2015).

³ Benedict XVI, Homily, Holy Thursday (13 April 2006).

pride that does not want to admit or recognize that we are in need of purification.”⁴

We can refuse to have our feet washed. Even Peter himself at first rejected the Lord’s offer, “you will never wash my feet” (Jn 13:8). But almost immediately he had second thoughts – as he later also had about his threefold denial of Jesus – and readily agreed to the cleansing, even desiring that it be more thorough: “Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head” (Jn 13:9).

Jesus prepared his disciples for the first Eucharist by purifying his Apostles, as he does us by offering us the grace of repentance and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

2. The Eucharist as a Memorial

But what is truly happening at Mass? Is it a banquet of fellowship, of communion among believers? Yes, but much more than that. Is it a ritual for us to bring to mind, to recall in memory, the long-past events of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection so as to be stirred to gratitude for God’s love? A mere “calling to mind” – a purely symbolic interpretation of what happened at the Last Supper – is not nearly enough to convey the richness of the Church’s teaching on Jesus’ Real Presence in the Eucharist.

We have a correct answer to the question – what really happens at

⁴ Benedict XVI, Homily, Holy Thursday (13 April 2006).

Mass – in tonight’s other two Readings. St. Paul reports what he had “received from the Lord” (1 Cor 11:23). And what the Apostle had received is the command to do what Jesus has done “on the night when he was betrayed” (1 Cor 11:23); that is, to make present his Body and Blood as a way of proclaiming his death until he comes again (cf. 1 Cor 11:24).

To make present his Body and Blood is to make present the event of the new Passover, the Passover of Jesus, and no longer the Passover of Israel which was recounted in the First Reading. This new Passover is his Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven.

Jesus brought the original Jewish Passover to fulfilment. Today, the Mass is, as Pope Francis very recently said,

the memorial of Jesus’ Passover, of his “exodus,” which he carried out for us, so as to lead us out of slavery and introduce us to the promised land of eternal life. . . . In the Mass we celebrate Passover. We, during Mass, are with Jesus, who died and is risen, and he draws us forth to eternal life. . . .It makes us participants in his victory over sin and death.⁵

3. “You also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15)

The Gospel of the Washing of the Feet concludes with Jesus’

⁵ Francis, General Audience (22 November 2017).

command: “You also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15). We are not meant to be bystanders gawking at his selfless action. Even tonight the lesson for us is two-fold: not only must I let Jesus cleanse me but also, “whose feet have I washed? whose feet should I wash?” Jesus is pretty clear about the fact that he has set an example for us: “you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15) if you are to celebrate worthily and with fruitfulness his Passover, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

But, we might ask: how do we wash one another’s feet? What does this mean in practice? It undoubtedly means this: every good work done for others – especially for the suffering, the ignored in our families and communities, and the marginalized – is a service of the washing of feet.

But, as Pope Benedict, has said:

there is another, deeper dimension. The Lord removes the dirt from us with the purifying power of his goodness. Washing one another’s feet means above all tirelessly forgiving one another, beginning together ever anew, however pointless it may seem. It means purifying one another by bearing with one another and by being tolerant of others; purifying one another, giving one another the sanctifying power of the Word of God and introducing one another into the Sacrament of divine love.⁶

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Holy Thursday (13 April 2006).

Conclusion

As we proceed to the Rite of the Washing of Feet, let us ask the Lord to cleanse us, wiping away our sins, so that we may celebrate this Eucharist – the Passover of the New Covenant – with joy and in obedience to his command “to wash one another’s feet” (Jn 13:14).

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