

Holy Thursday

6th April 2023

'Triduum I, Humility and Sacrifice'

Ex 12: the Passover instructions Ps 115: *the cup of salvation I will raise*

1Cor 11: *this is what I received and in turn passed on to you ...*

Jn 13: 1–15: *if I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.*

Several of us watched, last night — as is my customary tradition at this time of year — the very moving 2004 film of 'The Passion of the Christ.' Some of you might have seen it before; it recounts the final hours of Jesus's earthly ministry, from the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane to His death on the Cross at Calvary, with a final brief glimpse of the Resurrection. The film is 'shot through' with Scriptural and theological references, as it had Catholic priests and others advising on its production. There are continuous 'flashbacks' to previous moments of Jesus's earthly ministry — e.g. His life at home with Mary; His preaching the Sermon on the Mount; His forgiving and giving new hope to the Woman taken in Adultery.

But for me, one of the loveliest things in the film is the repeated cutting back and forth from the Crucifixion itself to the Last Supper of the night before He died. The film emphasizes with cinematic clarity an identification of

those two things: the Blessed Sacrament instituted at the Last Supper, and the Holy Sacrifice offered on Calvary. As Jesus is stripped of His garments, so we see the unleavened bread of the Passover being uncovered at Jesus's hands; as His body is raised high on the Cross, so we see the Eucharistic bread being elevated by Jesus at the table for His Apostles; as His precious blood flows down the Cross from His nailed feet, so we see the Chalice of the Precious Blood taken by Christ to share with His nascent Church — the blood of the new and eternal covenant. The two elements are in fact the same one mystery, the one, once-and-for-all Sacrifice, offered on the Cross, offered first at the Last Supper, and now offered daily on the altars of Christ's Church for all time.

This is a very important datum for our Christian life: that we are able to *have access* to that saving Sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus. We do not live in Palestine in the 1st c.; we are not able to be there in the city of Jerusalem in 33AD, and kneel at the foot of the Cross and stand by the tomb awaiting the Resurrection. How are we, then, to participate

in Jesus's death and rising again? Is it just tough luck that we are 2000 yrs too late, and 2000+ miles away? — *Unlucky!* No! He dearly wants us to be able to share in the grace of His victory over sin and death, and that is why, in this most sublime of Sacraments, He chooses to anticipate at the Last Supper the sacramental form of His divine self-offering. The Mass and the Cross are one and the same; had there been no Cross on Good Friday, the sacramental words and actions of Holy Thursday would have made no sense. He wants to bequeath to His followers the infallible capacity to experience at first hand the blessings of His sacrifice; this He gives us in those astonishing words that stand at the centre of history, inexorably bound up with the events on Calvary: "*This is My Body given up for you ... This is My Blood, poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins.*" We cannot hang on the Cross for our *own* salvation; we cannot even stand at the foot of the Cross like Mary and kiss His nailed feet and have His Precious Blood stain our lips ... But we *can* go to Mass; we *can* pray kneeling at the foot of the altar; we *can*

hear His sacred words, repeated every time at the consecration; we *can* be truly present at the sacred offering; we *can* be fed with the most sacred food of spiritual life; we *can* take His precious blood on our lips and know that He is truly present in our souls, as much now as then. This is the glory, the mystery, and the awesome wisdom of our saving God, that He gives Himself into our hands, now as then. He comes to us now, as then, for that is what He so dearly wants: to be with us as the *food* of our souls, and as the saving Victim that we can offer as the *ransomer* of our souls.

But, as we know from the Gospel tonight (Jn 13), there is an important preliminary to the Sacramental actions of the Last Supper, and that's the *Washing of the Feet*. Before the Lord exercises His divinity in the miracle of the Sacrament that embodies His Sacrifice, he prefaces it with an equally astonishing expression of His humble humanity. The Carrying of the Cross the following day will be the most moving display of condescension imaginable by the living God, and something that we

cannot partake in, not really — a *crushing* humiliation, that only the Son of God can have borne, such is His overpowering love for us. But, the day before in the quiet prayerfulness of the Upper Room, He did give us an action of humility that we can share in — the Washing of the Feet. I think that, rather in parallel to His offering us the Sacrament of the Eucharist as an accessible means to the grace-filled Sacrifice of the Cross; so also He offers us in the Washing of the Feet an accessible means to the graceful exercise of humility: He asks of us only *humility*, and not the *humiliation* He was willing to take upon Himself. So then, acts of washing each others' feet are part and parcel of the Lord's great command, an essential and practical living-out of "love your neighbour as yourself."

We must recognise, then, that our Gospel faith (our Catholic duty) consists *both* in the celebration of the Eucharist *and* in the celebration of Washing the Feet. In the 'school' of Holy Thursday at the Last Supper our Lord & Master teaches us that which we can actually achieve, with His grace. There are parts of this saving action that

are reserved to *Him* — the horrors of Good Friday on the *Via Crucis* and in the consummation of the Cross — but there are also parts that are reserved to *us*, and which He commands us to participate in if we are actually to have a share in His life: the prayerful offering of the Mass, and the deeply loving, practical, compassionate acts of mercy to our fellow pilgrims on the road of life, family, friends, neighbours, strangers, the homeless, migrants, refugees ... all humanity, for they are our brothers and sisters.

So much can we draw from being here attentively this Maundy Thursday night; so much that guides our Catholic life, as we watch, listen, obey and love our Lord Jesus. As we draw close to Him tonight at the very outset of His sacred Passion, may the lessons of His holy teaching, actions and example, lodge peacefully and permanently in our hearts. His humility and His Sacrifice, divine and human both, cannot but inspire us to works and worship of great charity.

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est. "Where charity and love are, there is God."