

Holy Thursday

28th March 2024

'Triduum I, Humility in Washing, Eucharist, Priesthood'

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.*

You cannot have Holy Thursday without Good Friday ... and you cannot have Good Friday without Easter Sunday. So, what we have set out on, this holy night, is a *Triduum*, a three-days' journey, a triple commemoration, taking us from the Upper Room Passover ... to Calvary and the Cross ... and to the Tomb/Burial, the scene of the Defeat of Death. We shall make this three-fold journey together, marking each step of the way in spiritual companionship with Our Blessed Lord, who leads us on our way, and is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. These days form the sacred centrepiece of our Christian year, and indeed the heart of all our Catholic belief and practice. Our whole life is built around what we celebrate in these days! Let us embrace them with real attention of heart and devout openness of soul; let us 'feel' the importance of what we are setting out on tonight; these sacred things are the most significant things of our life, for blessedness of earthly life,

and eternal beatitude in heaven. This is not a neat turn of phrase, or pious platitude: the spiritual meaning of the Triduum is a matter of life-and-death! — Jesus's life and death, spilling over and shared with us: life and death!

We find ourselves first, this evening, then, at the 'Upper Room' of Jesus's keeping of Passover with His apostles, a moment that Our Lord had keenly looked forward to: "*I have longed with great longing,*" He says, "*to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*" (Lk 22: 15). He knows full well, even if the apostles do not, that this is the 'Last Supper,' and how full of poignancy does that make it! Imagine the *hugely conflicting emotions* in Our Lord's sacred heart: He longs for this celebration, with all its constituent elements, and yet it is also a leave-taking, and the prelude to the Passion. No Holy Thursday without Good Friday: the two are interwoven, not just as day follows night, but as sacrifice follows and necessitates sacrament — the two are in fact one.

Let's unfold these multiple elements of the Lord's Supper: (i) there's the *Mandatum*, the Washing of the Feet,

leading to the New Commandment, “*Love one another, as I have loved you*”; (ii) there’s the keeping of the Passover rituals, at least at first; (iii) there’s the deviation from the Passover rituals, or, rather, their elevation, into a new liturgy, the Most Holy Eucharist; and (iv) there’s the Consecration of the Apostles as Our Lord’s first priests. No wonder Jesus “longed with great longing” for this Last Supper, that He might commit to His nascent Church these transformative gifts: *Mandatum, Exemplum, Sacramentum*.

The **Washing of the Feet**, that we will symbolically re-enact in a few moments’ time, expresses the self-emptying of the Son of God. We heard words last Sunday from St Paul as he incorporated into his Letter to the Philippians (2:6) a Christian hymn in usage at the time: “*Christ Jesus did not cling to His equality with God, but emptied Himself, to assume the condition of a slave.*” Indeed, just so, *literally*. At the opening of the Last Supper, He assumes the condition of a slave, undertaking a task that no Jew would have stooped to: it was a humiliating action usually consigned to Gentile slaves. No wonder St

Peter baulks at this: he cannot bear to see his Master kneel, humbling Himself at his feet and washing them. Yet Jesus is insistent — the first of many surprises at the Last Supper, expressions of deep and divine humility. “*If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you.*” The mandate, the *Mandatum*, is clear, with no wiggle room. We are to serve one another, humbly and devotedly, and in particular help one another to accept being cleansed by Jesus and ready to encounter Him in the Holy Eucharist. We must first defeat our own arrogance, in the face of Jesus’s insistence on humility, before we are in any position to lead others to the humility needed to accept Christ’s cleansing. This is the commandment that Jesus delivers at the Last Supper to one and all, the most fundamental Christian rule of life: let’s hear it anew this sacred night, and take it to heart: “*love one another as I have loved you.*”

Only once He has washed their feet to prepare the Apostles for other sacred actions is He then able to offer

them the next element of this remarkable evening: the offering of the Mass, the **Institution of the Most Holy Eucharist**. This, too, is an expression of divine self-emptying, *kenosis*, humility, isn't it? — in fact, the most extreme! Not only does the Son of God humble Himself from heaven to take flesh; not only in His humanity does He humble Himself and kneel at our feet in the condition of a slave, “*to serve, and not to be served*”; but He is then willing to give over His whole self to us in sacramental form, reduced to the unimpressive outward appearances of bread and wine, sacrament of His sacrificial dying and rising. No wonder we balk at this! St Peter balked at Jesus's getting out the bowl and towels — yes, sometimes we might draw back at the extreme expression of humility that is the Blessed Sacrament; in awe, and sometimes in doubt, that God could, or would, do this! That God would die for us, whilst we were still sinners, will always be a stumbling block for many; that He would then offer the graces of that very same reconciling sacrifice in the humble forms present on the altar, is for sure a stumbling block to

many more. And yet, neither Jesus Himself, nor His Holy Church, recoils from proclaiming this in every age. The Holy Eucharist *really is* His divine presence, His Body & Blood, offered into our hands, onto our tongues, into our souls. How surprised must the Apostles have been, as Jesus transforms the venerable rite of the Passover (1250yrs old at the time) into a far greater memorial, a new exodus from the slavery of sin. All of this is contained in the Sacrament of the Lamb of God: bursting with grace, the divine life of Jesus, and given into the care of the Church, to “*do this as a memorial of Me,*” His most intimate presence to the disciples of His Church until the end of the world.

And what does this also require? The preaching of the New Commandment; the urge to fulfil the *Mandatum* of serving one another humbly; and most of all the sacramental rites of the New and Eternal Paschal Supper: these require a further humility on the part of the Saviour: it necessitates His handing over / handing on His ministry to others. For another crucial element of this Last Supper is the commissioning / consecration / **ordination of the**

Apostles as priests of the New Covenant. That is, Holy Thursday is also the *birthday of the Christian Priesthood*. We do not get to hear it at this Mass this evening, but a key chapter of St John's account of the Last Supper is the *High Priestly Prayer* of Jesus (Jn 17). In that consecratory prayer Jesus ordains His Apostles to be His priests (*bishops*, in fact) and to continue His saving mission in the world as He goes to the Father: "*Consecrate them in the Truth; Your word is Truth. As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*" As we keep Holy Thursday together, it is important for us to be mindful of the centrality of the Priesthood to our faith, and the dignity of that other Sacrament bestowed by Christ upon His Church: Ordination. We thank God for His many holy priests down through 20 centuries, who have celebrated the Sacraments — most especially the Holy Mass — and nourished the lives of the faithful, giving strength to their faith. And we thank God for the priests who have touched *our* lives, whether many or few, and who still do guide us and make present for our Communion and our Adoration

the sacred gift of Jesus's Eucharistic Presence. We pray for them, and we pray for many more devout vocations to the Priesthood and religious life. I wear this evening, as always on Holy Thursday, the chasuble given to me by my parents and in which I was clothed on my ordination day: it seems right that I too give great thanks for the gift of the Priesthood, and ask for your prayers as I serve you and work with you and for you here in this university ministry.

Yes, no wonder Jesus "*longed with great longing*" to bring to a close the ancient Passover and to open for the world the great new mysteries of the Church, so powerful and beautiful as they are. Let's have our minds and hearts truly open tonight to the utter beauty of Jesus's humble Example and saving Sacraments: and at this first station of the *Triduum*, the Upper Room, contemplate His divine person. And quietly, too, acknowledge that soon we will have to *leave* the Upper Room, and walk with Him across the Kidron Valley for the unfolding of Friday's Passion that is the spiritual fuel that fires the inner life of Thursday's gifts and sacraments.