

Holy Thursday

17<sup>th</sup> April 2025

'Triduum I: the 2 foci'

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.*

My own undergraduate degree and doctoral research career was in science, specializing in physics and then radio astronomy. I rarely allude to it here in my homilies, although I think it *is* helpful in this modern, scientific age to know “how the heavens go” as well as “how to go to heaven” in the play on words made famous by Galileo. Those of you familiar with some maths or astronomy will know what an *ellipse* is. It's the oval shape described by an orbit, e.g. of a planet or a comet round the Sun, though most planetary orbits are almost — but not quite — circular. An ellipse has 2 *foci*, two ‘centres,’ so to speak, around which the orbit or revolution occurs. Now, I always think of this holy first night of the Paschal *Triduum*, Maundy Thursday, as having 2 *foci* around which the sacred action revolves: each is ‘central,’ each is equally important. The 2 *foci* of Holy Thursday are: the *mandatum*, the Washing of the Feet, and the *sacramentum*,

the Holy Eucharist along with the ministerial Priesthood which it necessitates. Around these two sacred mysteries the whole of tonight's celebration turns.

We can extend this idea of the two *foci* to the wider Gospel teaching of Our Lord. When quizzed by a Jewish scribe about “the greatest commandment in the Law,” He replied not with one answer but with two: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength ... and love your neighbour as yourself.*” Effectively the same 2 *foci*: Love of God, and Love of Neighbour. He cannot give one answer to “which is the greatest commandment,” He has to give two — distinct but inseparable, like the linked *foci* of an elliptical orbit. On these two hang the whole of the Law, He says, and the Prophets — the whole of God's saving Revelation in Old Testament and New.

St John, in his wonderful 1<sup>st</sup> Letter, also alludes to a double focus when he forcefully reminds his hearers:

We love because [God] first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love

God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (ESV: 1 John 4:19–21)

It's a constant theme, running through the teaching of Christ, these 2 *foci* of Christian life. No wonder, then, at that critical moment in the Upper Room, the Last Supper, the night before He was to be taken from them brutally in death, Our Lord would once again bring it to the attention of the Apostles: not just phrased in words, this time, but expressed in actions, saving and visible signs, that grabbed the imagination of the Church, that night and ever since.

The *mandatum*, the Washing of the Feet, is a clear call to 'Love one's Neighbour' to the fullest extent possible: "*Here I am,*" says Jesus, "*as one who serves*" and "*If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*" The Lord places this action not as an afterthought to the Eucharist, but as the *preliminary*, the necessary pre-requisite, the indispensable complement, to loving worship of God. We will also recall and re-enact this *mandatum* — "*Love one another as I have loved you*" — prior to the celebration of

the Holy Eucharist tonight. If we are to be Catholic Christians faithfully and lovingly keeping weekly, or daily, devotion to Holy Mass, then we cannot ignore the call to conscious attentiveness to the needs of those around us. To do otherwise would be to close our eyes to what Jesus did: Jn 13 describes with detail and deliberation this action of service. We cannot skirt around it; Holy Thursday places it front and centre of this evening's liturgy. It is a *mandatum*, a 'thing commanded,' not recommended, idealistic, or optional. *Am I loving my Neighbour?* Am I Washing the Feet of others around me? It has been very encouraging this particular Easter to see the Newman-House Soup Run going out weekly even in to these vacation weeks, up to and including last night, to serve those most needy on our very doorstep, in tents and mattresses on Tottenham Court Rd. However we participate in Our Lord's *mandatum*, let's just make sure that we do have some act of service a regular part of our Christian life, and not leave it forgotten to one side as we focus on our own business. On Holy Thursday evening,

this sacred last night of Jesus's ministry, He places it right before us: "*I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.*"

Only then, after giving us the *mandatum* of active *Love for Neighbour*, do we move on to the *sacramentum*, the Holy Eucharist, in which we express *Love for God* in this new radical re-working of the Jewish Passover, the "new and eternal sacrifice." It is equally important; it is the other indispensable focus of the Christian orbit, our trajectory of right living. We cannot live only the Love for Neighbour; we must live also our Love for God, because, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council says, "*when humanity loses sight of the Creator, the Creature is lost sight of as well.*" "Both ... and ..." — the 2 *foci* at work. Holy Mass, our weekly or daily dedication to the supreme sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross offered sacramentally, is the most perfect way to express our Love for God, because it recalls and represents (makes present again in our midst, in our very time and place, our own little lives on Gower St in 2025) the infinite Love of Jesus for the Father, therefore the love

of mankind for God. We are so weak at loving God, but we are thankfully caught up as baptized brothers and sisters by the God-made-man in order to worship God as we should. He provides for us the perfect liturgy, the unsurpassable sacrifice, the Sacrament of His self-offering, in His Holy Body & Blood. He spoon-feeds us, as it were; he treats us as such beloved little children, that He wants us to have this wonderful gift; He doesn't want to have us struggle, search and miss out on Life: instead He gives the very thing we so desperately need, an infallible way to the Father and to heaven: the Eucharist, a "highway to heaven" as Blessed (almost St) Carlo Acutis put it in his astonishing teenage faith. As Catholics, like Blessed Carlo, let's love the Mass more and more as the years go by, deepening our appreciation of this 2<sup>nd</sup> focus of the Lord's Holy-Thursday gift. Let's never get so used to the Mass that our awe and wonder at its audaciousness as a divine gift to poor, weak, sinful humanity is lost on us. "*O Sacrament most Holy, O Sacrament Divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine.*"

As we commemorate this holy night, the institution of the most Holy Eucharist, we cannot ignore the fact that whilst the Church's *mandatum* is principally led by the laity, the *sacramentum* requires by Jesus's intention the ordained clergy. The sacraments of the Eucharist and the Priesthood are also bound up into an orbit all of their own, a dual-focus where one requires the other. As we offer the many prayers of this unique celebration of Holy Thursday, we include a prayer for our Pope, bishops, priests and deacons. We give thanks to God for those priests who have touched our lives in blessed ways, perhaps from when we were just small children in our home parishes, and helped our families keep the faith, and grow in faith. And a part of that same prayer is for *vocations to the Priesthood*. We priests renewed before the Archbishop our priestly dedication to the sacred ministry on Tuesday at the Chrism Mass in the Cathedral; here, tonight, it's right that we pray for more *vocations to the Priesthood* that Jesus instituted at that Last Supper, so that His blessed Eucharist could be offered in perpetual memory for, and perpetual

sanctification of, His holy people. Please God, those in our own midst, in our own Chaplaincy, whom the Lord desires to respond to His call to the Priesthood will hear that call through their dedication to the work of God lived out here at Newman House — in the *mandatum* and the *sacramentum*, their work of service and their life of prayer.

This fervent prayer to the Lord for many more priests is one with the prayer for a renewed love for, and commitment of us all to, Jesus present in the Holy Mass; and with our prayer for this self-offering Jesus to bless our generous charitable actions to one another. The Last Supper encompasses so much of what our life is about. Maybe life sometimes seems complicated, fractured, messy and even miserable! Let's each place our life humbly on the altar tonight, and receive the outpouring of grace as He comes amongst us, His Real Presence, His divine Person. He *wants* the Mass to unite us with Himself, so that we are blessed with hope and the courage to live a truly heroic Christian life: Love for God, and Love for Neighbour as the twin *foci*, ever in sight, of a life well-lived in His sight.