

Holy Thursday

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2026

‘Triduum I: In finem dilexit eos’

Ex 12: ordinances for the Passover meal

Ps 115: *the cup of blessing is a communion in the blood of Christ*

1Cor 11: *for as often as you eat and drink, you proclaim the Lord’s death*

Jn 13: 1–15: *He loved them to the end.*

St John, whose incomparably poetic and moving Gospel text has been our near-constant companion through these latter weeks of Lent — the Sunday Gospels of wks III, IV, & V; and most of the weekday Gospels since wk IV; and the Passion that we hear tomorrow — is also addressing us tonight: the beginning of his account of the Last Supper, where he, the “beloved disciple” reclined alongside Jesus who enacted the saving mysteries of that auspicious evening meal. St John has that knack of summing up in just a tiny phrase the essence of a significant idea. Think of his distilling the nature of God in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter: “*God is love.*” Or at the moment of Judas’s betrayal and treacherous exit from the Last Supper: “*It was night.*” For me, John’s mini-phrase that sums up tonight is in the very 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the Gospel, ch. 13, as the Last Supper begins: “*He loved them to the end.*” That’s the motto and motif for Holy Thursday: *He loved them to the end. In finem dilexit*

*eos*, a phrase much beloved of St Augustine in his writings; εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς in the original Greek of St John: *He loved them to the end.* This pithy Johannine theology-bite doesn’t merely remind us that we are almost at the end of Jesus’s earthly life & ministry, but, more importantly, that He loved them to the end, i.e. *to the utmost*. Those whom the Father had given Him he had not lost, apart from the one who chose to be lost. He had loved them “to the end,” even Judas, and with them, all of humanity: to the very utmost, to the giving-up of His sacred humanity, His Body & Blood, on the Cross. Holy Thursday is, necessarily, the preliminary to that Good Friday sacrifice, preparing for it, and anticipating it, in three ways: **the Foot Washing**; the **Priesthood** of the new Covenant; the **Holy Eucharist**. Each of them is an important dimension of that divine expression of Jesus’s rationale as the Son of God, *He loved them to the end.*

Incredibly, or so it seems, St John’s Gospel does not include the institution narrative of the Holy Eucharist — whose all-important details are instead given multiple

attestation by SS Matthew, Mark & Luke, in their Gospels, and by St Paul in his letters (such as we heard there in 1Cor 11). John's own great witness to the Eucharist comes in the most sublime of all NT chapters, Jn 6 ... but that's for looking at another day! Jn 13, instead, begins the Last Supper, as we have heard, with the *mandatum*, the **Washing of the Feet**. How come? Isn't that just a domestic detail of ablutions that is quite secondary? No, seemingly not, as Jesus states categorially to St Peter, "*if I do not wash you, you have no share with Me.*" Before our Lord sets about introducing to the Apostles the awesome Sacraments, instituting the Priesthood and the Eucharist, He first sets the scene — gives the context of the Church's life and liturgy: that of humble service. "*He loved them to the end*" clearly includes: 'I must kneel before you like a slave and wash your feet.' The humility that Jesus — our Lord & Teacher — manifests, to the utmost, is "*a bending down in pity, not a failure of power*" (words of Pope St Leo the Great as he describes the Incarnation in his famous *Tome* at the time of the Council of Chalcedon in the mid-

5<sup>th</sup> c.) — "a bending down in pity, not a failure of power." Jesus bends down to wash the Apostles' feet, because that is what He as the Son of God has come to do in the Incarnation: evidence and give example of the humility that is the divine key to human and humane living. As Pope St Leo goes on to say: "He who in the form of God was the Maker of man, was Himself made man in the form of a slave" (Letter 28). And so, as He has given us this context and example, at the very outset of the Church's origins, in that Last Supper *cenacle*, so we also must do to one another. This is a non-negotiable: we are here as the Church to serve humanity as Christ did.

It is in that frame that Our Lord in His Last Supper goes on to give two great gifts to His Church: the **Sacramental Priesthood** and the **Blessed Eucharist** of His Body & Blood. Both are celebrated as part of this Holy Thursday. In the Chrism Mass of Holy Week, the priests of each diocese renew their pledge to Christ, through a questioning by their Bishop: we in Westminster did this on Tuesday, though it is formally linked to Holy

Thursday. We were asked, amongst other things, “Are you resolved to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God in the Holy Eucharist and the other liturgical rites ...?” There is an unbreakable bond between the Priesthood and the Holy Mass — one cannot exist without the other — just as there is an unbreakable bond between Jesus Christ and the Sacrifice He came to offer, “loving us to the end.” Our Lord shares the office of His unique priestly ministry with other men so as to perpetuate His Sacrifice to all the ages to come: His is the Sacrifice, and His is the Sacrament that makes it present, and in order that the grace and unity of this Sacrament be experienced by the whole of His Church, He gives us also brother priests. In ch. 17 of St John’s Gospel — a later chapter within the long text of the Last Supper — Our Lord prays the ‘High Priestly Prayer’ over His Apostles gathered there that night, and “*consecrates them in the truth*”: it is, in effect, their episcopal ordination. On this Holy Thursday night let’s give thanks for, and pray for, our priests: the ones we have known; the ones who have helped us to Christ; the ones who have

dispensed the life-giving graces of Baptism, the Mass, Confession, on us and built up our Christian life; the ones who are still to come — those discerning the call to the Priesthood in their life right now.

The **Washing of the Feet**, and the **Founding of the Priesthood**, then make way for the **Institution of the Holy Eucharist**. It is here, as Jesus with Messianic authority upgrades the powerful ritual of the Jewish Passover to a very new and efficacious form of Sacrificial offering, that we reach the high-point of Holy Thursday’s memorials, the “living memorial” of Jesus’s self-giving, “*My flesh, for the life of the world.*” This, too, is a *loving them to the end*, loving us all to the end of the world, in the most intimate, humbling and self-emptying way: the mere forms of bread and wine. In this new Sacrament, the old Passover lamb of Sacrifice (from Exodus) is replaced, surpassed, exceeded: this new Passover has no lamb other than the Lamb of God Himself, who utilizes those sacred and ancient elements from the Passover — unleavened bread, and a chalice of wine — to give Himself to us, and to re-present (fully,

really, divinely) His loving Sacrifice and self-offering, for all the ages to come. No wonder that, of all the Sacraments, this one *we actually worship*. We hear, we accept, and we kneel down humbly in awe: “*This is My Body, given for you ... This is My Blood, poured out for you.*” This really is. *Tantum ergo Sacramentum, veneremur cernui*, we shall sing at the end of Mass tonight: *therefore, let us venerate with bowed heads so great a Sacrament*. This is what we do as Catholics; it is the very heart of all Catholic practice, and we believe it flows right out of that powerhouse of Jesus’s grace-filled gathering the night before He died; it is truly the greatest of all His gifts to us. What more could He possibly give than Himself? He would give it on the *Cross* in Sacrifice to take away our sins; He gave it also — the self-same Sacrifice — as Sacrament in transformed, *transubstantiated Bread & Wine*, the night before, to the end. It is on this high-point of Catholic life that we are launched into the *Triduum* tonight, and made ready and blessed to keep the sorrowful & awful memorial of the Passion tomorrow, the Friday

that we rightly call *Good*. Even St Thomas Aquinas struggles to find expressions sublime enough to capture the love-to-the-end with which Jesus so abundantly fills this Blessed Sacrament of His:

“And so, in order to imprint the immensity of this love more deeply in the hearts of the faithful, at the Last Supper, when the Lord had celebrated the *Pasch* with His disciples and was about to pass from this world to His Father, He instituted this Sacrament as a perpetual memorial of His Passion. It fulfilled the types of the Old Law; it was the greatest of all the miracles that He worked; and He left it as a unique consolation to those who were desolate at His departure.”

(Office of Readings for *Corpus Christi*)