

Holy Thursday + 17 April 2025 + Ex 12:1-8, 11-14 + I Cor 11:23-26 + Jn 13:1-15

According to the Roman Missal, today's liturgy is meant to commemorate 3 critical mysteries of our faith: the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist, the ordination of the first New Covenant priests, and the universal call of all Christians to Christ-like charity. So tonight, I'd like to begin our meditation with Christ's washing the feet of His disciples. It is interesting to note that this event is exclusive to John's Gospel: it is not recorded in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. And yet John does not explicitly record the institution of the Eucharist. So we can see from this that there must be an intimate connection between these two events: foot washing and Eucharist.

So first, the washing of the feet. Remember, Jesus lived in a mediterranean, desert climate. If they could afford shoes, most people wore sandals. Which means people had dirty feet, including the disciples. While it was not uncommon to wash your guest's feet, it would have been an unthinkable action for the host to do: foot washing was the job of the household slave. And yet, Jesus doesn't hesitate to stoop down to the role of the slave. So we heard Him say in last Sunday's Gospel of the Passion: *who is greater: the one seated at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one seated at table? I am among you as the one who serves* (Lk 22:27). And so this action can be seen as a summary in miniature of not only all that Jesus *did* while on earth, but even more, who He truly *is*: the very Lord, who is one in being with the Father, stooping below His creatures, and *taking the form of a slave*, as St. Paul put it in last Sunday's 2nd reading from his letter to the Philippians (2:7).

But He went even further; and here we come to the institution of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus will not only serve mankind in the lowliest of circumstances; He will die for us. At the last supper, Jesus not only interprets His coming death, but He transforms this act of *violence* into an act of perfect *love*; meaning, He freely chooses to take our place on the cross. And so He says to those disciples who have put their faith in Him: *This is my body that is for you...this cup is the new covenant in my blood* (cf. I Cor 11). Recall that a *covenant* is the privileged means that God has chosen to relate to His people. It is not just a contract, or a legal exchange of property, but a solemn exchange of persons. It is holy. In the Eucharist, Christ initiates the New Covenant: He gives Himself to us: body, blood, soul and divinity. All that is left is our response. Will we give ourselves back to Him in faith?

And that brings us to another connection between the foot washing and the institution of the Eucharist: they are both commandments explicitly given by the Lord to His disciples: *I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do, and, do this in remembrance of me* (Luke 22:19; I Cor 11:25). If we accept the invitation of love of the Lord who was and is among us *as one who serves*, as one who has loved us *to the end* in the Eucharist, we must respond to this covenantal invitation with a like response: to offer ourselves back to Him in love completely, and to love all those for whom He gave His life.

But this response brings us to a profound difference between these two commands. The Lord's washing of the disciples' feet, and the foot washing that we will have tonight, are symbols, giving us a powerful visual reminder of our call to love in imitation of the One who first loved us, even in the "dirt" of our sins. That true greatness in Christianity is found in humble service. But make no mistake: the Eucharist is not just a symbol. It doesn't simply remind us of what the Lord did for us. Rather, it is the very body and blood of Christ, broken and shed for us, *for the forgiveness of sins*. That distinction makes a world of difference, and brings us back to the notion of response.

If you pick up where our 2nd reading leaves off in St. Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians (11:27-30), which sadly is not in the lectionary, you will hear: *whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying.* If the Eucharist were a symbol, "unworthy reception" would be bad. But if it is truly the real presence of the crucified and risen Lord, then worthy reception is deeply serious business.

Why? Because we are talking about covenantal union here. To receive Holy Communion flippantly, carelessly, without faith, or yes, unworthily, is analogous to deserting your spouse. Now, some might say, *how can I ever be worthy of so great a gift?!* Good question! We can never 'make ourselves' good enough for God, no matter how hard we try. Only Christ can make us worthy. So He says to Peter in our Gospel today: *unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.* And so we plead at each Mass: *Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof, but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed!*

So what can we do on our part? Well, as we said, we can choose to put our faith in Him as Lord. We can ask Him to deepen our faith in His real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. We can surrender our lives to Him. And we can ask Him to help us to love Him more, and ask that our love for Him would flow over to the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Him.

One last consideration: this liturgy tonight also marks the ordination of the first New Covenant priests. Just as Moses washed the feet of Aaron and his sons in the Old Covenant ordination ritual, so Jesus bestows on His chosen men at the Last Supper the authority to offer sacrifice in atonement for sins: in this case, the sacrifice of His own body and blood. So what makes a man open his heart to something so radical these days as a possible call to the priesthood? Well, it comes down to this: a man won't give his life for a symbol. But He will give it for a Savior, who gave His life for all of us, and continues to give Himself to us in a most amazing way in the Holy Eucharist. As we come to the end of our 3 year-long Eucharistic revival in the US, and as we receive His body and blood in the Most Holy Eucharist, let us beg the Lord this night for the grace to live for Him who died for us.