

**“Example and Mandate in the Work of Our Salvation”**  
**Homily, Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper**  
**April 18, 2019**

**Introduction**

Last Monday we all watched with panic and sadness beyond words as the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris was being consumed by a fiery inferno. And we all feel profound thanks to the firefighters who worked so hard to preserve the church from total destruction; and thankful, as well, to the people who knelt and prayed nearby. Now, the entire world mourns.

This tragedy has driven home the point of what Notre Dame Cathedral means to people of all faiths and even of no faith: it is an iconic structure, beautiful and majestic, a symbol of Western Civilization and the glory that human genius can accomplish when inspired and assisted by the divine. But, especially to people of faith, it is, above all, a sacred space. Which was most horrifying of all: what we witnessed was the destruction of the sacred. What is it, though, that makes something sacred?

**Recognizing the Sacred**

The sacred quality of a physical object or sound consists in its capacity to connect us to the divine; it is marked by the qualities of beauty, holiness and transcendence. This gives it a sacramental quality: a sign pointing to and making present something greater beyond itself.

Tonight we celebrate the most sacred gift of all: Jesus’ gift of himself to us in that sacrament we call the Blessed Sacrament, the Most Holy Eucharist. Unique with this sacrament is that it connects us to the divine not by taking us beyond ourselves, but by the divine coming to us, making itself present in our midst. The question is, though, do we really have the eyes of faith to see this, to recognize the sacredness of the gift? How is it that we acquire this spiritual vision?

The movement of the divine coming down from heaven to be with us is the entire movement of the Son of God in the work of our salvation. It begins at the first moment: the very mystery of the Incarnation is one of God lowering Himself, coming down from heaven to make Himself present in our world by sending His Son to take on our human flesh. And if that were not enough, he chooses to be born into a family of no social status or distinction, to the point that he was born in a stable. That remains the pattern of his entire earthly life: the King of Kings did not live in palaces when he walked this earth, but grew up in a simple, working class family and remained poor and even homeless in his public life: “the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58). And he did not stop there. He went all the way to lowering himself to death, and the most ignominious death possible: sentenced to death as a criminal dangerous to the state.

We just heard the Gospel proclaimed in which Jesus models this whole movement of the work of our salvation for his apostles, and, in keeping with this Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper, in a few moments we will reenact it: Jesus lowering himself to wash his apostles’ feet, the master performing the most menial of tasks of slaves for his disciples. Remember what he tells them: “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” He gives them an example and a commandment – that is, a mandate, the word from which this day in Holy Week derives its traditional name, “Maundy Thursday.”

“As I have done, so you must do.” Will you? Are you willing to do the same as he has done for you? If so, you will recognize the sacredness of the gift, and respond accordingly; to

ignore and to abuse it is to destroy the sacred. The example of Jesus, the entire movement of his earthly existence from the first moment of his conception in this world, is the answer to the question, "How is it that we acquire this spiritual vision to recognize the sacredness of the gift?" It is by obeying the mandate of Jesus to follow his example of humility before God and humble service to others.

### **Amen**

The Church, in her desire to help us on the path to salvation, gives us reminders of the sacredness of the gift and how to recognize it in the form of gestures and other ritualistic actions. One such action will follow at the end of this Mass: we will process with the sacred gift, the Blessed Sacrament, to its place of repose in commemoration of Jesus leaving the Upper Room after the Last Supper and seeking solitude in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died. But there are also more repeated actions that become a part of our routine: kneeling for the Eucharistic Prayer, in humble adoration of the Eucharist that is being consecrated; genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament when passing in front of it and when entering church; and even this cycle of Lent and Easter, which serves as a reminder that self-denial is the necessary prerequisite to sharing glory with Christ.

All of this is for the sake of helping us put into practice our sense of the sacred in living our lives as true Christians: the primacy of prayer; fidelity to one's vocation; purity of mind, heart and body; serving others with cheerful generosity. Only in this way do we honor this sacred gift that Jesus instituted for us this night, and most especially when we approach to receive it. This is the significance of our response every time we receive the gift: "Amen." "Amen" is an affirmation of faith; when we utter "Amen" upon receiving Holy Communion, it signifies that we are staking our entire life on the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and that we take him at his word to do for others as he has done for us.

We affirm "Amen" to the gift that has been handed down to us from the apostles who were there that night, as St. Paul tells us in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." "Receiving" and "handing on" is the language of tradition, a reminder of our sacred duty to hand this gift on to others, so that it may continue until our Lord returns to judge the living and the dead. This is what our "Amen" means, and to ignore or to abuse it is to violate the sacred; we would make ourselves into hypocrites. And yet, none of us is completely free of that.

Lent is now coming to its culmination; it is a reminder to us of our need of constant purification, so that we can more perfectly obey the commandment of following the example of the one who lowered himself for us; a time to repent, return, believe and renew ourselves in living according to our Christian dignity.

### **Conclusion**

As we enter into these sacred three days of the Passion, death and Resurrection of our Lord, let us ask God for the grace to honor Him by making of our entire lives a sacred space where He may find a welcome and a place to dwell, so that we, His Church, may be a sacred sign to others connecting them to the divine, to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, God's gift of His Son to us for the sake of our eternal salvation.