

“Humility: the First Step on the Path Toward Spiritual Health and Salvation”

Homily, Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper

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Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption

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Introduction

It may seem ironic that the unusual circumstances in which we are celebrating this Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday is due to a plague. What we commemorate tonight is, after all, the Christian Passover, and the original Passover was brought about because of a plague, the plague over Egypt. The ancient Israelites had to flee Egypt in a hurry. We heard a description of this in our first reading from the Book of Exodus.

Doing Things Differently

Now, in this current plague, people are also fleeing, but not away; rather, they are fleeing to the refuge of their own homes, staying there. Just as the ancient Israelites were protected from the angel of death by staying home with their door posts marked with the blood of the lamb, so we protect ourselves from a contagion that can bring death by staying within our own homes. But this means doing things differently, just as it did for the ancient Israelites: because of their haste to leave Egypt they had to eat unleavened bread, “with [their] loins girt, sandals on [their] feet and [their] staff in hand, ... like those who are in flight.” So we, too, are doing things differently, including for our ceremonies during this Sacred Triduum.

The restrictions by which we are abiding, religious as well as secular, means that our Mass tonight will not conclude with the procession with the Blessed Sacrament, as is normally prescribed at the conclusion of this Holy Thursday liturgy. And the most distinctive feature of this Mass will also be omitted, the washing of the feet, because of the safety precautions prescribed for us by the Church for this year. The reenactment of what Jesus did at the Last Supper is always a bit striking, and since we cannot witness it acted out tonight, I would like to reflect on this for a while. It is worth reflecting on feet.

The Plight of the Feet

Think about it: the feet are the lowliest part of the body, and they are also the part of the body that absorbs the most punishment and so can most easily become worn out. They are the part that is furthest away from the headquarters of the central nervous system, the brain, but they are also critical to a sense of well-being. When one’s feet ache, one is miserable; and just think, on the other hand, of the popularity of the foot massage! The feet are not the faculty of the body one would probably think of first when it comes to well-being. It’s other bodily faculties that would come to mind, such as good digestion or a healthy respiratory system. But the lowly feet are also very critical to this sense of well-being. And even in a metaphorical sense the foot is given the lowest place. Just think, for example, of the expression “at the foot of the table”: it is the end of the table that is opposite the head, furthest away.

In biblical times, the foot was especially subject to harsh treatment. Think about this, too: the roads in first century Palestine were dusty and rough, and people wore simple sandals with no socks. The feet got a pretty harsh workout, and were easily wounded and sore. Plus, they were constantly getting dirty. This required washing of the feet before anyone entered a home, which was a lowly, menial task assigned to the lowest servant. Also, people would never wear their sandals inside the home, because the sandals were dirty from the road and also considered defiled because of that. And so we can understand God's command to Moses when He appeared to him in the burning bush: that he remove the sandals from his feet because the ground on which he was standing was holy ground (Ex 3:5).

With this in mind, we can understand how shocking it must have been to Jesus' disciples when he washed their feet on that last night that he was with them. The feet are the lowliest part of the body, and to wash them, one must lower oneself, bending down low, all the way to the ground. For the master to perform this most menial task must, indeed, have been shocking.

Health and Salvation

At the same time, though, the feet are also given special attention in the Bible. For example, when the people of Israel wandered through the Sinai desert – a journey the beginning of which we celebrate this evening – the sign of God's care for them was that He protected their feet during the journey from harm and swelling (Dt 8:4; 29:5). Also, the privileged place of learning is “to sit at the feet” of the teacher (Dt 33:3; Lk 10:39; Acts 22:3). And the prophet Isaiah even extols the feet where he says: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one bringing good news, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, saying to Zion, ‘Your God is King!’” (Is 52:7).

The Master was teaching his disciples – teaching us – a lesson by example, performing the most menial task on a part of the body that is integral to an overall sense of health and well-being. When we consider all of this, that lesson becomes clear: the way to well-being is the path of lowliness, that is to say, the virtue of humility. Humility is the starting point to our spiritual health, because it opens the door to the other virtues that are required to be spiritually healthy. This is the Good News our Lord brings us and makes possible for us. But just what is spiritual health? We can take a lesson from the official language of the Church.

The word “salus” in Latin means “health.” Keep in mind that the early Christians were evangelizing a pagan world with the teachings of our Lord – who spoke Aramaic – and were using Scriptures written in Hebrew and Greek. When they began evangelizing a Latin-speaking world, they had to find a word to convey the meaning of “salvation.” The word they chose was “salus.” The word “salus” in Latin means health and salvation. So we can understand how those early Christians saw it: salvation is nothing other than spiritual health. Which means that humility is the good nutrition that is the key to salvation.

Conclusion

While we are doing things differently this year, the spiritual principles remain constant. They were taught, demonstrated, and embodied for us by our Lord. He is our health and

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salvation, and by fulfilling his great commandment to do for others as he has done for us, our hearts will be open to receive this great gift he wishes to give us.