

Maundy Thursday
April 18, 2019
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
John 13:1-15

On August 18, 2008, four years to the day before the Dedication of this church, French forces fighting in Afghanistan were ambushed in the Uzbin Valley, outside of Kabul. The army chaplain serving with those forces was Fr. Jean-Marc Fournier, who survived the combat that took the lives of ten of his countrymen. Later, Fr. Fournier would return to Paris to become the chaplain to that city's fire brigades, and it was in that capacity that he ministered to the wounded civilians and rescue personnel who survived the massacre at the Bataclan theatre in the fall of 2015. On Monday, it should come as no surprise, it was Fr. Fournier who entered Notre Dame Cathedral while it was burning in order to extract from it the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Tabernacle, as well as the Crown of Thorns, our Lord's relic that King St. Lois IX brought to France from the Holy Land upon his return from the Crusades. Fr. Fournier has been hailed as a hero by the Catholic press, of course, but his fearlessness in the face of one tragedy after another has drawn the attention of the secular press, as well.

If you have not heard of Fr. Fournier until now, that is not surprising, either, as most priests of God's Church are not glory hounds, and the press today is more often interested in the clergy's misdeed than in their good deeds. His example is such, though, that we can't not pay attention. We can't help but ask—and even the secular press is wondering—where does such courage come from?

Tonight we celebrate the institution of two sacraments, and what we do to celebrate them in both instances has to do with self-emptying. In the case of the institution of the priesthood, we observe it through the Maundy, the ceremony whereby every priest across the globe gets down on his hands and knees and washes the feet of Christ's disciples. Jesus said, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." To assume the posture of a slave reminds the priest of whose servant he is, recalling at the same time in whose place he acts. Our Lord came as one who serves, so every priest must imitate this mode of service at least once a year.

A person lacking in humility recoils at the thought of such abject self-abnegation. So while one might bring himself to perform a ceremony once a year, what it represents is much harder to fake. A priest is asked to be humble in every part of his life in order that he might be a model for his parishioners in terms of what it means to follow Christ. The man who is humble sees himself

as a servant first. He understands that he lives to serve others. Others don't exist simply to serve him.

It is in this capacity as servant that a man like Fr. Fournier then is able to risk his life over and over again in his care for the sheep. This brings us to the second sacramental institution we celebrate tonight, that of the Holy Eucharist. When Jesus said, "Do this...in remembrance of me," he was telling us to offer ourselves in love in the same way He has offered Himself. For the Eucharist is a re-presentation of the one, holy sacrifice offered upon the Altar of the Cross. When a priest celebrates the Mass, he unites himself to Christ's suffering and death. He re-presents on a daily basis the complete self-oblation of Jesus on Calvary and, in doing so, reiterates what being a servant means. To be a servant is to be willing day in and day out to lay down one's life for one's friends. "For greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." In your reception of Holy Communion, the laity do the same thing, uniting themselves in the flesh to Jesus Himself, becoming more like Him, assuming the posture of those condemned to death in order to have a share in the Lord of Life.

What I have articulated tonight is the theology of the Church as regards both the institution of the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist. The scandals of the past year, exposing scandals going back seventy-five years or more, reveal that not all of Christ's chosen communicators of His grace live according to the service they were ordained to uphold. But this week, this Holy Week, we have seen in Fr. Jean-Marc Fournier that the Church is yet blessed with men who understand themselves to be servants and thus are willing to lay down their lives with the courage that could come only from Him who has conquered death. Because Christ lives, Fr. Fournier has faced down not only the fire that almost destroyed Notre Dame, but the Taliban and Isis, too—and that's just in the last eleven years.

It is worth noting that Fr. Fournier is a native Frenchman, from a country where we are told repeatedly by those in the know that the Faith is dead. This is the same country that gave us one year ago Col. Arnaud Beltrame, the Catholic police officer who exchanged his life for that of a hostage and, two years before that, Fr. Jacques Hamel, murdered while celebrating the Holy Mass. It doesn't take a genius to see the Faith is not dead in France. It is alive in the land that won for our own nation, in 1781 at Yorktown, its independence. May the heroics of the sons of the Eldest Daughter of the Church reinvigorate the Faith in the country of their birth and among all those who have borne witness to their courage.