“Jesus Manifests the Love of God”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

April 9, 2020

Holy Thursday

Live-Streamed from St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

“Jesus loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.” Brothers and sisters, this evening we begin the Sacred Triduum, the holy three days when we celebrate the mysteries of our redemption. Jesus came into our world in the flesh, and all his teaching, all his miracles, his entire life will reach its climax in these days. Of course, we celebrate these mysteries in a very different way this year. There’s a sadness in our observance of the Triduum because we are separated from each other in this time of pandemic. But even from a distance, Christ is present to his Church in this moment, and he is especially close to those who suffer. So, as we begin this sacred celebration, we lift up in prayer all those who suffer illness, and those who have died. We unite ourselves to them through our Lord’s sacrifice, and we pray for God’s blessing upon them.

This evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper is a solemn moment. Jesus knows what is coming. He knows that his enemies are at work, and that the evil one will try to thwart God’s plan of salvation for his people. Jesus knows that he is at the center of a great spiritual conflict between the powers of darkness and the power of God. On the night of Passover, the people of Israel were also in the midst of a battle between the power of Pharaoh and the power of God, who was determined to save them, for they were his people, his beloved children. So too, on the night of Passover in that upper room, Jesus would bring the power of God’s love to inaugurate his Kingdom and to save his people from sin and death. We are there with him in that upper room, and he looks on each one of us with the same love he had for the twelve.

As they began that Passover meal, John tells us that Jesus “loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.” In each element of this supper, Jesus manifests the love of God for us, and that love takes visible form. First, of course, is the Eucharist. Jesus was prepared to offer his life for us, but he wanted his offering to endure for all time. He wanted to extend that offering, that sacrifice beyond those chosen disciples who joined him. His sacrifice would be eternal and would reach out to every corner of the globe. So in the course of their Passover meal, Jesus took the bread and blessed it, as was customary. But then he did something different. As he gave them the bread, he said, “This is my body that is for you.” And giving them the customary cup of wine, he said, “This is my blood of the new covenant.” Jesus loved his followers, he loves us, to such an extent that he makes his sacrifice perpetual, he places himself in our hands. Under the forms of bread and wine, he offers us the gift of his life so that he might be in us and we might be in him.

The Eucharist is the life of the Church, because it is Jesus himself. Over the course of centuries, many have tried to explain away what Jesus did. Many have tried to diminish the reality of what the Eucharist is. But we come together for this celebration tonight because we believe what Jesus said: This is my body, this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me. What Jesus would do for us in love upon the cross at Calvary, he does for us every time we celebrate the Eucharist. He offers us his body and blood so that he may abide in us and we may
abide in him. So great is his love that he cannot bear to be parted from us, and he continues to place himself in our hands as a living sacrifice, as nourishment for our souls. I know that Catholics everywhere tonight are yearning for his gift, and once again, there’s a sadness at our distance from the Eucharistic Lord. A priest that I know visited a man in prison, who told him how much he missed the Eucharist. He said, “It’s only when you are deprived of something that you realize how precious it is.” In our longing, we know that Christ comes to us even now, and how joyful we will be, along with brothers and sisters around the world, when once again we can join together at the altar and receive the One who loved us to the end.

In that same supper, Jesus also bestows on his followers the gift of the priesthood. To those who were with him he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Do this. Continue what I have begun. Carry forward this sacrifice and share it with my people. Be my instruments, my apostles, my priests in the world. Just as Jesus chose to take on our human nature and save us through his own flesh and blood, he continues now to extend his love for his people through the flesh and blood humanity of his priests. Through their ministry, which means service, Jesus teaches the truth of God’s eternal plan. He proclaims the forgiveness of our sins. He extends the healing grace of his Spirit. And he carries forward the sacrifice that he would make upon the cross for our redemption. Through his priests, Jesus remains among us, and he offers us his body and blood just as he did to those first disciples. Through our priests, we are united with the Apostles to Jesus in the Eucharist. As St. John Vianney has said, “The priesthood is nothing other than the love of the heart of Christ.” Don’t forget to pray for your priests, because they are made of the same humanity you are. But through them, Jesus makes his love present to us, especially at the altar.

And finally, Jesus demonstrates how that love must play out in our lives. During the meal, Jesus took a basin and towel and began to wash the feet of his disciples. This was the work of a servant, a household slave, but Jesus did it to show them, and us, what it means to be his follower. “As I have done for you, you should also do.” Each one of us is called to be a servant to the other, to imitate Jesus in his willingness to wash the feet of his neighbor. In fact, the more we live for others in this life, the more we take on the likeness of Jesus, and the more ready we will be for the eternity that awaits us. Even now, when necessity keeps us apart, Jesus urges us to look after each other, to attend to those in need, to be his loving presence to a world in pain.

Everything about this supper foreshadows what Jesus would do the next day. He will pour out his life for us upon the cross, just as he does in every celebration of the Eucharist. He will become our High Priest and offer the one perfect sacrifice to the Father, as every priest does. And he sets for all of us an example of selfless service and love. This is a solemn night, but a night marked with the imprint of God’s love. Jesus “loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.”