

Fr. Curtis Miller

April 9, 2020

Homily for Holy Thursday

Even though this Holy Thursday is different from any other we've experienced, we still pause to commemorate the Last Supper and to thank our Lord Jesus for two particular gifts that He gave us on that night: the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood.

In the Eucharist, Jesus takes mere bread and wine, and miraculously transforms them into His own Body and Blood to nourish our souls. In the priesthood, Jesus takes mere men, His apostles down through the centuries to the men who become priests today, and transforms them into ministers of His grace. In both of these gifts, Jesus takes something that is lowly and He consecrates it to become a way He can remain with us always, even until the end of the age. Jesus was not content to minister just to the people of Israel who met Him during His earthly ministry. He wants to reach out to each of us individually, to continue to teach us, heal us, and lead us into eternal life.

The Last Supper, as you know, was a Passover meal. The first Passover meal took place many centuries earlier, on the night before God saved His people from slavery in Egypt. At this meal a lamb was sacrificed and eaten by the members of each family. The lamb's blood was shed so that the people would be saved.

And so it was at the Last Supper. Jesus offered His Body and Blood sacramentally on that night, and then showed the meaning of that gift the next day by visibly sacrificing His Body and Blood on the cross. He did this to save not just one people from slavery to another nation, but to save all people of all time from slavery to sin and death. At every Mass, Jesus feeds us not with a sacrificial lamb, but with His own Body and Blood. Though we are not able to gather here in person to receive our Lord sacramentally, we are still able ask Jesus to enter our hearts spiritually. Maybe this time of being separated from Jesus physically will help all of us to appreciate this incredible gift better, and inspire us to receive Him with even greater love and devotion when we are able to return to Mass.

At the Last Supper, Jesus also washed His disciples' feet, setting an example for us of self-sacrifice and humble service. So many of you are already heroically following that example. First of all, you who are doctors, nurses, medical personnel, and other emergency first responders are risking your own health and safety to save others from this terrible pandemic. Parents, you are also making sacrifices as you struggle to balance becoming your children's teachers with working from home or figuring out how to pay the bills when you're out of work. Some of you are sacrificing to take care of a sick parent or spouse. Others of you are still working in grocery stores or volunteering to deliver meals to people who would otherwise go hungry. There are thousands of other sacrifices that we are all making. Let us not grow weary or discouraged, but instead draw strength from our Lord as He humbly kneels down to wash His disciples' feet.

Now if I asked you to close your eyes and picture the Last Supper, probably most of us would see the famous fresco by Da Vinci: Jesus seated serenely at the center, symmetrically flanked by six apostles on either side. Lately, however, I've been thinking about another version of this scene, a painting by Tintoretto. In this image, the symmetry is all gone. The long table is off to the side, with the apostles seated around it as Jesus distributes the Eucharist to them. All around them, though, the room is hectic, bustling with servants and other people busy about their own tasks. They don't seem to notice the important moment taking place across the room.

I think this painting pretty well sums up what it feels like to be Catholic right now. We're trying to focus on Jesus, but all around us the world seems to have gone crazy. Everyone is busy, stressed out, and fearful. All our familiar certainties and routines seem to have been dashed apart. Yet here in our midst is Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. He is Emmanuel, "God with us." He is especially with us when we walk through dark times.

At the Last Supper, Jesus says to us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." He said this only a few hours before He knew He was going to be betrayed, arrested, and crucified. How can Jesus still tell us to not be troubled? Because He sees beyond the darkness. Jesus sees His victory over sin and death in His resurrection. He invites us to join Him at this joyful wedding feast, at this sacrificial altar, to receive the gift of His very Body and Blood, so that He might strengthen our lagging spirits, and lift up our eyes out of darkness, to behold the wondrous light of His unfailing presence.