

HOLY THURSDAY  
“Faith Expressed Through Loving Service”  
(Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-15)

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Have you ever noticed the change that happens to someone when they fall in love?

Let the love of Jesus lead you into intimacy with him and humble service of others.

Tonight, we remember that intimate meal Jesus had with his disciples the night before he died to show his love for all humankind. It was a meal that continues to speak to us today about the Eucharist, about priesthood (ministerial and baptismal), and about Christian love or *agape* expressed in humble service.

The first reading about the Passover meal in Egypt prepares us for what Jesus would do centuries later on the cross - give up his body and shed his blood for us. The Hebrew people sacrificed a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts, and the angel of death “passed over them.” What power the angel of God gave to the flesh and blood of a lamb! Imagine the power there is in the flesh and blood of Jesus, the true Lamb of God, for those who believe in him, for faith in him is the key to that power.

The second reading takes us to the “Last Supper”, the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples the night before his death. The Church sees this meal as the institution of the Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood for us as Catholic Christians. This meal is the “New Passover” - we no longer need to sacrifice lambs and sprinkle their blood on altars. Rather, we believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit and the prayer of the ordained priest and community of faith, the simple gifts of bread and wine become for us the sacred body and blood of Jesus Christ. For those who really believe and approach in faith, reverence and repentance, this “communion with the body and blood of Christ” breaks the power of sin, heals our sinfulness, and is itself a sharing right now in the heavenly banquet Jesus promised us.

We are preparing for the International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec City, June of 2008. In the light of that coming event, this is an invitation to reflect on the mystery of the Eucharist, to try to understand it more fully, and live it more deeply in daily life.

One description of the Eucharist is that it is a Memorial Meal and a Thanksgiving Sacrifice. In terms of a Memorial, our faith is based on remembering. The Hebrew people were to remember what God had done for them in Egypt as an ordinance. We remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. Remembering is important, as we realize when someone we love loses their memory. Remembering for the Hebrews was also very effective – it made present that which was remembered. To remember what Jesus did for us is, in that sense, to make present that same action on the altar. So the Eucharist is first of all a Memorial.

The Eucharist is also a Meal, as was the Passover meal in Egypt – a sacred meal that holds within it the humble, yet mighty saving power of God that freed the Chosen people, and frees those now who approach it with faith. We gather around the table of the Lord as a family, a faith-family meal using humble gifts of bread and wine.

The word Eucharist in Greek means Thanksgiving. A grateful person is a happy person. The Eucharist is our greatest prayer of thanksgiving to God for all that he has done for us in creation, and in Christ his Son.

And lastly, it is a Sacrifice. Jesus made the greatest sacrifice of all on the cross – the sacrifice of his life given for us. The words used are an important detail. The verb “removal” of Jesus’ clothes is the same as that for laying down his life, thus connecting the foot-washing with the gift of his life. The verb “wiping” with the towel links the foot-washing with the anointing of Jesus earlier. It is the sacrifice of his life that we remember, and commemorate when we celebrate the Eucharist. It is the love of that sacrifice that is made present for us whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. We are truly a Eucharistic people.

The gospel strikingly reminds us that we do not celebrate the Eucharist for our own sake, or for our own personal holiness only, as if that was disconnected from life. We do it for others, for the broken world. Surprisingly, the gospel for this night when we remember the institution of the priesthood and the Eucharist, is not the account of the last supper, but the washing of feet.

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples to show the meaning of the priesthood, the meaning of the Eucharist, the meaning of our own baptism, and the meaning of what he would do the next day on the cross. Love, following Jesus and Christian ministry is not about power and glory. No - love, following Jesus and ministry, is all about humble service.

There can be no compromise about this. Those who profess to follow Jesus, filled with his Spirit, must die to power and glory, and willingly accept to express their faith and love through humble service, through “washing each others’ feet.” To wash each other’s feet is to serve one another lovingly with complete humility. When we were baptized, we were made priests (prayer); prophets (truth) and shepherds (caregivers). We live out our baptism by celebrating the Eucharist together, and then going out to live lives of humble service, washing the feet of our brothers and sisters.

The New Interpreters Bible adds another dimension of meaning to the washing of feet. Foot-washing had three purposes: personal hygiene; hospitality and a cultic act. A servant would wash feet; a host would provide hospitality. Here, the combination of service and hospitality is strong. When Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, he combines the roles of servant and host. It is this strange combination that Peter protests.

The foot-washing is thus a symbolic act of eschatological hospitality through which Jesus shares his home – that is, the Father’s home - with his disciples. The foot-washing is an eschatological act because through it Jesus manifests the unity and intimacy of God,

Jesus, and the believer that marks full relationship with God. It draws the disciple into the love that marks God's and Jesus' relationship to each other and to the world.

Through the foot-washing, Jesus unites the believer with him as he enters the events of his hour. If one removes oneself from this act, then one removes oneself from Jesus and the promises of God. To have Jesus wash one's feet is to receive from Jesus an act of hospitality that decisively alters one's relationship to Jesus and through Jesus to God. One's share with Jesus, then, is the gift of full relationship with him which he offers in the foot washing, a relationship that opens the believer to Jesus' eschatological gift of eternal life. The salvific dimension of the foot washing, therefore, is lodged in the relationship with Jesus that it offers, not in the foot washing as an act of ritual purification.

Peter's emphatic request to be washed all over shows that he still does not understand the relational dimension of the act. The foot-washing is not about water per se: it is about entering into relationship with Jesus by receiving his gesture of hospitality.

The cleanliness of which Jesus speaks is accomplished by one's reception of Jesus' word, not by the ritual cleansing Peter envisions and requests. Jesus' own are clean through their reception of his enacted and spoken word. The fact that the one who is not clean is the one who will betray Jesus confirms that cleanliness has to do with one's relationship with Jesus and acceptance of the foot-washing, not with the cleansing power of the water itself. To be unclean is not to be unwashed, for Judas was washed too. Rather, to be unclean is to turn away from union and intimacy with Jesus.

As at the earlier prediction of the betrayal, the mention of Judas' betrayal reminds the reader that even election as one of Jesus' own, one whom he loves completely, is no guarantee of a faith response. In order to have one's share with Jesus, one must choose to accept the gesture of love that Jesus makes in the foot-washing and enter into an intimate relationship with him and the Father through him.

Lillian Yonkers was president of Oblate College in San Antonio, Texas. The group of priests and sisters who had completed a renewal program at Ministry to Ministers in San Antonio were told that she would be coming to their closing banquet. Indeed, there was an extra place set at the table for her. However, the banquet started without her. The participants were somewhat bemused, wondering why she had not come, when suddenly she appeared out of the kitchen, dressed with an apron. She had come, not as the guest of honour, but as one who would serve their table. The participants were surprised and delighted, yet also humbled – the president of the college was serving them. What an example of discipleship – truly following the teachings of Jesus!

A familiar old hymn captures in one stanza the spirit of this Holy Thursday celebration: *Called from worship into service; forth in his great name we go. To the child, the youth, the aged, love in living deeds to show.*

So as we celebrate tonight the gifts of priesthood and Eucharist given out of tremendous love by God to the Church, let us appreciate the Eucharist as a memorial meal and thanksgiving sacrifice.

Let us also take to heart the meaning of these gifts - humble service and intimate union with Jesus and the Father. Let us pray for the faith and love to live out the Eucharist and our baptismal priesthood in humble service.

