

HOLY THURSDAY – (Homily 04)
“Celebrating a Triple-Header”
(Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-15)

To use a term from the world of baseball, tonight we celebrate a triple-header. First of all, we commemorate the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist. Secondly, we celebrate the ministerial priesthood through which the Eucharist is made available to us. Both are signs of God’s unconditional, extravagant love for humanity. And finally, we deepen our appreciation of the priesthood of the faithful, called to respond to God’s love for us through selfless loving Christian service to the world.

Underlying all of this is the power of God’s love to work in our lives, to liberate us from sin and evil, to give us the freedom of the children of God. That is where it all begins, in the first reading. The Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt, persecuted and oppressed. Then God heard their cry and worked powerfully through the great prophet Moses to free God’s people through the blood and flesh of a lamb, the Paschal Lamb. That ritual action led to their release from slavery, and became the foundation of all that we celebrate today, the Eucharist, priesthood and Christian service.

It is called the foundation because centuries later, Jesus would choose the Jewish Paschal meal as the way that he would commemorate ritually the gift of his life to us and to the world on the cross.

St. Paul, in the second reading, takes us to the heart of this celebration as he helps us remember how Jesus took the bread and wine of that Jewish meal and transformed them into his own Body and Blood as the new and eternal Paschal Lamb. The old rite was simply that, a rite that remembered and commemorated the liberation of the Hebrew people from political slavery, but did not personally transform hearts. This new ritual was a new covenant between God and God’s people, a ritual that has within it the power to save, to redeem, to heal and to transform.

In giving us this new ritual of the Eucharist as the High Priest of the new covenant, Jesus revealed to us the depth of God’s love for us, displayed for us on the Cross, the total gift of his life for us as a selfless sacrifice. Our participation in this rite and our baptism into the Church, the Body of Christ in the world, commits us to in turn share with the world that same unconditional love of the Father.

We do that through humble, selfless service of our brothers and sisters and all those in need. That is why in the Gospel of John, there is no institution of the Eucharist as there is in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead, Jesus takes up a towel and water and washes the feet of his disciples. This shocking, unheard-of action in that society at that time, is a strong statement of the meaning of the Eucharist, the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of all the baptized. That meaning is all about humble service.

From now on, it is clear that to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, to be a member of the Church, is not about glory, power, titles, honour or control. It is and can only be all about humble, lowly, loving, selfless service to all in need. That is a lesson that each generation of believers has to constantly learn and relearn and live out on a daily basis.

In April of 2011, the Catholic Foundation of Manitoba honoured the St. Amant Centre for its work with the physically and mentally challenged people in the area of Winnipeg. Started by the Grey Nuns in 1931 as the St. Boniface Sanitorium for tuberculosis patients, it became a hospital admitting children with disabilities in 1959. When the entire space became dedicated to meeting the needs of persons with developmental disabilities, it was renamed the St. Amant Centre in 1974 in honour of Beatrice St. Amant who had done pioneering work with epileptic children. From the beginning, the Grey Nuns were leaders in the care and education of every individual, overcoming negative attitudes towards those with developmental disabilities. They continued to provide leadership and direction to St. Amant into the 1990's. St. Amant grew from a small organization into the largest provider of community living services in Manitoba, supporting individuals and their families with residential options, family care and outreach service throughout the province. St. Amant has partnered with the University of Manitoba and is home to the St. Amant Research Centre which is at the cutting edge of improving quality of life for individuals with developmental disabilities through research and education. Truly, the many dedicated men and women at St. Amant have lived out the Eucharist and washed many feet since its inception in 1931, a true example of Christian service.

Our celebration tonight of Holy Thursday, is an invitation to truly experience a triple-header, celebrating the Eucharist, the ministerial priesthood, and the call to selfless Christian service. This is our Exodus meal of the flesh and blood of the Lamb of God, washing us in God's love and empowering us to share that love with others through selfless loving service of all in need.

