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Homily/Addresses

Holy Thursday Homily:
“This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world...”

Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, Denver, CO, Holy Thursday, April 9, 2009

“This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; happy are those who are called to His Supper.”

These are the words the priest proclaims in the Mass, just before we receive Our Lord, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, in Holy Communion. We’ve heard these words as long as we can remember going to Mass, and we are happy, indeed, to be called to His Supper.

This evening we celebrate the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, and we thank the Lord for the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the institution of the Sacrament of Holy Orders on that very first Holy Thursday two thousand years ago.

Today is sometimes called “Maundy Thursday”, which comes from the Latin word *mandatum*. Our English word “mandate” comes from this Latin root and this was the word Jesus used after He had washed the feet of the Apostles when He gave them, and us, the new commandment: “love one another as I have loved you” (*mandatum novum dedi vos*).

So we commemorate three events this evening: the institution of the Holy Eucharist; the institution of the Priesthood; and Jesus’ new commandment to love one another as He has loved us.

And all of this took place within the context of the Last Supper, the last Passover meal that Our Lord shared with His apostles, the night before His Passion and Death.

On the evening of Holy Thursday, Jesus anticipated His death on the cross, His sacrificial act of love for the world, through a sacred meal. In a mysterious and sacramental way, He commanded His apostles and their successors to renew this act of love until the end of time when He said: “Do this in remembrance of Me.” This is why the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, is the “source and summit of the Christian life.” It was Christ’s way of perpetuating His love and His Presence in the world until the end of time.

Through the power of His words, spoken by the priest who is consecrated and ordained in His name, *Alter Christus* (another Christ), bread becomes His Body and wine becomes His Blood. The death of Jesus on the cross is inextricably linked to the Last Supper and every time the Holy Mass is celebrated, the sacrificial death of Jesus is presented and re-presented to His heavenly Father, in an unbloody way, for the remission of sins.

In the words of Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11: “For as often as eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

The Eucharist and the priesthood were instituted simultaneously by Christ the night of the Last Supper and given as a new and everlasting covenant. This new covenant was sealed, not by the blood of animals as in the covenants of old, but it was sealed in the precious Blood of Christ. “Happy are those who are called to His supper.”

And although the third element of this evening’s Mass may seem strange and out of place, namely the washing of the Apostles’ feet, which we too will re-enact in a few moments, it is actually, supremely significant and perfectly fitting in the context of the Last Supper.

Jesus tells His apostles, after He had washed their feet, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

In other words, the Holy Eucharist draws us into the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. As He humbled Himself to serve His apostles by washing their feet, so He showed us the way we are to love and serve one another.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, (God is Love), put it like this:

"Jesus gave this act of oblation an enduring presence through His institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper...The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation" (his act of self-giving love). He goes on to say: "More than just statically receiving the Incarnate Word, we enter into the very dynamic of His self-giving."

Yes, happy are those who are called to His supper. "But Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, only say the word and I shall be healed."

None of us are worthy of such a remarkable gift. But we can make ourselves less unworthy to receive the Lord by having frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of Confession. Just as Jesus spent a great deal of His time on earth forgiving sinners, reconciling those who had strayed, and healing the wounded; so on this night with the institution of the priesthood, He makes it possible to continue His ministry of mercy in the person of the priest.

He said to His apostles on the evening of the resurrection; "whose sins you forgive on earth, they are forgiven in heaven."

In so many words Jesus washes our feet, that is, he washes our souls in preparation to receive Him in Holy Communion.

After the Last Supper, the Apostles went out with Jesus across the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Olives, to pray with Him and to keep watch.

We will do the same thing this evening after this Mass as we follow the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament in procession to the basement of the church to the Altar of Repose where we, too, can watch and pray with the Lord.

Let us take this time to thank the Lord for the great gift of the Lord in the Eucharist, the gift of the priesthood, and the gift of Christ's new commandment "to love as He loved."

Yes, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; happy are those who are called to His Supper!