

MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (2024)

This evening, we begin the Sacred Easter Triduum, the most holy time of the Church year. These final three days before Easter are special to all Christians, because on them, we commemorate the most sacred events of our Holy Catholic Faith, the Last Supper, the Suffering and Death of our Lord, and finally, the Resurrection where Jesus rose from the dead on the third day glorious and triumphant. The sacred liturgy recalls each of these events, and in a sense, it recreates them so that we might consider once again what happened to our blessed Lord so long ago.

Tonight, Holy Thursday, there are three very special events the Church wants us to ponder. The first is Christ's commandment of brotherly love. To explain this, Jesus did not teach by word, but by example. Consider the event just described in the Holy Gospel.

The Apostles were alone with Jesus in the upper room, the Cenacle. As faithful Jews, they had gathered there to celebrate the Passover Supper. This was a very special ritual which commemorated the exodus, the departure of the Jews from Egypt. As they went in haste, only unleavened bread, that is, bread without yeast was used. Also, a lamb was prepared and eaten. That food recalled the lamb whose blood was smeared on the doorpost so that the destroying angel would pass by the house and not slay the firstborn. We are reminded of the Passover by the first reading from the Book of Exodus.

Now this Passover was to be different. In fact, the apostles had no idea how different it was going to be. That night, Jesus their Messiah and Lord, was to become the sacrificial lamb. He was to offer Himself to His heavenly Father for the sins of the whole world. He would do this first in an unbloody manner at the Last Supper, and then the next day in a bloody manner upon the cross.

But first, he had to teach His disciples one of His most basic commandments: **"Love one another as I have loved you,"** and He did this by example. The holy gospel tells us, he took off His cloak and then proceeded to wash his disciples' feet. The lowliest part, that part which had trod through all the dirt and dust of the Judean countryside. This the Lord of the world did for men who were for the most part simple fishermen.

Then He told His disciples, go and do likewise. He had given them and He gives all of us that example. Go and do likewise. Just think what sort of a world this would be if all those who professed to be Christians would follow Christ's command to love one another. How much more good would be done, how little suffering would remain in the world. The Lord gave us this example because He wants all of us to live in harmony, to make the world a better place.

He promised that if we do this, our reward will be great in heaven. Recall the answer Jesus gave to the blessed who asked Him, **"Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or naked or a stranger or in prison and visit You?"** Jesus said, **"Amen I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. Therefore, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."** By serving the poor, the weak, the homeless and the imprisoned, we are indeed serving Christ.

The Second special event we should ponder this night is the institution of the most Holy Eucharist. Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians refers to this. After Jesus had washed the Apostles' feet, the Passover meal took an entirely new twist. Saint Paul tells us that Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to His disciples saying, **"This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."** He did this also with a cup of wine when He said, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it in remembrance of me."**

In fact, under the appearance of bread and wine Jesus had just given them Himself to eat. Then He commanded that they do what He had just done. That is why we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Because we follow the Lord's command to do what He did in remembrance of Him. He has given us Himself in this most Blessed Sacrament to feed us and nourish our spiritual lives until He comes again.

For Catholics, Christ's presence is no mere symbol. It is real. As real as any of us here present tonight are real. It is so marvelous as to be almost unbelievable and yet that is the only way we know of it, by faith. This evening in fact we will hear that great hymn of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Pange Lingua. It will be sung in Latin in Catholic Churches all over the world. This great hymn explains what took place that night at the Last Supper. One English translation of it is as follows:

Sing, my tongue, the mystery of the glorious Body and of the precious Blood, which the King of nations, the fruit of a noble womb, shed for the ransom of the world.

Given to us, and born for us of a spotless Virgin, He dwelt on earth, and, having sown the seed of the word, He closed in a wondrous manner the days of His (earthly) life.

On the night of the Last Supper, reclining with His brethren – the law having been fully complied with regarding legal foods – He gives Himself with His own hands as Food to the assembled twelve.

By His spoken word, the Word-made-Flesh makes true bread to be His flesh, and wine becomes the Blood of Christ; and if our senses fail (in recognizing this), faith alone suffices to assure a sincere heart.

Let us therefore, prostrate, adore so great a Sacrament; and let the Old Law give way to the new rite; let faith supplement the defect of the senses.

To the Father and to the Son be praise, glory, honor, power and benediction; and to Him proceeding from them both be equal praise.

So on this special night, we honor our Lord present in the blessed Sacrament in a special way. We wait with him and watch with Him as the Apostles did not. The special altar of repose symbolizes how, after the Last Supper, Jesus went with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There He took with Him Peter, James and John and asked them to pray with Him. Instead, they fell asleep. At last, Judas came, and Jesus was arrested and taken off to the high priest Caiaphas, and all His disciples fled.

The third and final event commemorated this night is the institution of the priesthood. In a sense, tonight is the birthday of all priests. In Chapter Six of Saint John's Gospel, Jesus said, **"Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will not have life in you."**

But, how were we to do this, we who come after Him? Jesus solved the problem by instituting the Priesthood. We are all familiar with the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance and Confirmation and Holy Communion and Matrimony, but most of us are not as familiar with the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the Sacrament which a priest receives when he is ordained.

That Sacrament gives a man the power to do as Jesus did, to change bread and wine into His body and blood and to forgive sins in His name. Jesus founded that Sacrament at the Last Supper to make it possible for future generations, for us, to partake of His Body and Blood. To be present with Him at the cross and to be nourished with this heavenly food.

So then, it is for these reasons that the Church rejoices tonight. Tonight let us imagine ourselves present at the Last Supper as Jesus instructed His apostles; as Jesus explained to them how they should treat their fellow man; of how afterwards He instituted the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar and of how He extended it to all times by making His apostles priests.

In fact, we really don't need to imagine ourselves at the Last Supper because as Christ's sacrifice extends through all ages and all times, tonight, and at every Mass, we are really there. Amen.