

Holy Thursday B/2009

Today we celebrate the two most significant sacraments of our Christian life, namely, the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood. All the readings of this Holy Thursday plunge us in the very depth of the mystery of Jesus' life.

That night, as Jesus ate for the last time with his disciples, he wanted to give himself to them and to the Church, as the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation, so that wherever and whenever this mystery is celebrated, we proclaim his death until he comes again.

The mystery we celebrate on Holy Thursday is rooted in what God did once to save the people of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. That is the reason why the first reading refers to the lamb that the Hebrews sacrificed on the night they left Egypt. Thanks to the blood of the lamb applied to the doorposts and the lintel of their house, they were spared from death, while the first born of the Egyptians were killed.

Following the command of the Lord, the Israelites had to celebrate this feast as a memorial for all the generations of the children of Israel. It was so that every year they celebrated the Passover in remembrance of the deliverance from Egypt.

Celebrating the Jewish Passover for the last time, Jesus gave this ancient memorial a new meaning. What was a memorial referring to the past became something totally new as Jesus identifies himself with the lamb of the sacrifice, making the past and the present coinciding in his person. As St Paul says, "The night he was handed over, Jesus took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me". In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me".

Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we proclaim the death of the Lord Jesus, our paschal sacrifice, offered to God to free us from the bondage of evil. In the signs of bread and wine, the true Lamb who takes away the sin of the world is present. The crucifix recalls that truth as it reminds that Christ gave his life on the cross for our salvation.

By commanding his apostles, "Do this in remembrance of me", the Lord Jesus instituted the sacramental ministry of priesthood. The priesthood and the Eucharist are bound up together. One cannot go without the other; one cannot be understood without the other. They hold together like twin brothers, contributing in a more specific way, according the will of the Lord, to the salvation of many.

In the Eucharist, we have two kinds of relationships, one vertical and another horizontal. The vertical relationship is that of our communion with the Lord. In fact, when we celebrate the Eucharist we are united with Christ offering himself for us as a sacrifice to the Father. In receiving the Eucharist we partake in the body and the blood of Christ. We become one with him. He is in us and we are in him as one body. By this communion we are invigorated on our earthly pilgrimage until we attain heaven, our eternal home.

When that night Jesus said after the supper, "You ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do", he was establishing the horizontal dimension of the Eucharist. In fact, in the Eucharist, we are not only united to the Lord Jesus, but also to the brothers and sisters with whom we partake in the sacrifice of the Lord.

In that sense, the Eucharist is not only a sacrifice, a sign of our self-surrendering with Jesus to the Father, but also a sign of our oneness with both God and the brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. What does lie in the institution of the Eucharist is a profound mystery. The Eucharist expresses the gift of total love for the service of our brothers and sisters. For that reason, in washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus shows that it is by dedicating our life to the well being of our fellow humans that we can resemble him.

That is why the priesthood, which is equally the ministry of the consecration of the body and blood of Christ for the salvation of the world, is above all a service. To be priest, then, means to be like Christ, to give up his life for the salvation of our brothers and sisters. Let us pray today for our priests so that they live by the example of Christ, totally given to others and to the service of God's kingdom. Let us pray for the leaders of our Church that they be guided by the Spirit of Christ in leading rightly and without error God's people to the fullness of salvation. Let us pray for one another that the Lord help us to be at the service of one another at the example of Christ. May God bless you all!

Exodus 12, 1- 8, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11, 23-26; John 13, 1-15



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