

Holy Thursday A/2017

Today we celebrate the institution of two important sacraments in the life of the Church, namely the Eucharist and the priesthood or Holy Order. All the readings of this Holy Thursday bring us to the heart of the mystery of the life of Jesus. They remind us that what happened that night was something deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition to which Jesus gave a new meaning and a new significance.

The first reading of the book of Exodus recalls the event of the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt. The night of their liberation, indeed, God commanded them to take from their livestock and to sacrifice a blameless lamb whose blood they should apply to the doorposts and the lintel of every house. That was a sign by which they had to be recognized as God's people and spared from death as the first born of the land, for both man and beasts were to be killed that night. God enjoined them also to celebrate that day as a perpetual institution for the generations to come in memory of their liberation.

It was on the night of the Jewish Passover celebration that Jesus was eating for the last time with his disciples. On that night, what was a memorial referring to the past became something totally new as Jesus identified 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".

In that perspective, whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, the Christian community proclaims the death of the Lord Jesus who has become our paschal sacrifice and who sets us free from evil. That is why, in the signs of bread and wine, the true Lamb who takes away the sin of the world is present. In the consecration of the bread and wine, Jesus himself comes to us in order to heal us and to bring us God's salvation in the same way that the lamb of the sacrifice has contributed to the salvation of the Israelites that night in Egypt.

Moreover, by commanding his apostles to always do what he has done in remembrance of him, Jesus instituted the sacramental ministry of priesthood. The priesthood and the Eucharist, indeed, are bound up together. As one cannot go without the other; it is impossible to understand one without the other. They all hold together like twin brothers, contributing in a more specific way, according to the will of the Lord, to the salvation of mankind.

In the Eucharist, we have two types of relationship, one vertical and another horizontal. The vertical relationship is that which reinforces our communion with the Lord. In fact, in the celebration of the Eucharist, we are united with Christ who offers himself to the Father in sacrifice for our salvation. In that sense, when we receive the Eucharist, we become one body with Christ as we partake in his body and his blood. He is in us and we are in him. At the same time, the communion we receive invigorates us so that we are able to continue our pilgrimage until the day we will be received at the eternal banquet in heaven.

The vertical relationship is that which reinforces our unity with one another as a body of Christ, that is, the church. In fact, when Jesus recommended his disciples to wash one another's feet in following his example, he was establishing the vertical dimension of the Eucharist. That is why, 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 and a sign of our self-surrendering with Jesus to the Father, but also a sign of our unity as 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



Homily Date: April 13, 2017

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Document Name: 20170413homily