

Homily for Holy Thursday

March 28, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 (The institution of the Passover tradition.)

Responsory: Psalm 116 (Our blessing cup is a communion in the Blood of Christ.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (Paul describes the institution of the Eucharist.)

Gospel: John 13:1-15 (Jesus washes his disciples' feet.)

Tonight's liturgy, the "Mass of the Lord's Supper," recalls *two* special rituals that Jesus performed at his last supper with his disciples, shortly before he was arrested, put on trial, and crucified. We heard St. Paul describe the tradition of *the Eucharist*, as it had been handed down to him. Of course, it sounds very familiar to us, because that same tradition has been handed down faithfully even to the present day. Every time we gather for Mass, we recall how Jesus took the bread and the cup of wine into his hands and said, "This is my body and blood, given for you." We understand that this modified Passover ritual was pointing toward Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. He was about to become the new Passover lamb, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" by offering up his life for our sake. Every time we participate in the Eucharist, we share in that sacrifice, and the Risen Christ shares his life with us through the sacrament.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe the institution of the Eucharist pretty much the same way that Paul describes it. But, the Gospel of John doesn't even mention this happening at the Last Supper. In fact, John says that the Last Supper took place *before the feast of Passover*, suggesting that this wasn't even a Passover meal at all. It seems very odd that John would not highlight the institution of the Eucharist, considering that his gospel features a lengthy "Bread of Life Discourse," in which Jesus speaks about himself as the bread that came down from heaven in order to give us eternal life. In the discourse, Jesus is clearly referring to the Eucharist and its connection with his sacrifice on the cross. Yet, John sees no need to retell the story of how Jesus celebrated the first Eucharist with his disciples. Instead, he describes a completely different ritual, which the other gospel writers chose not to include in their accounts of the Last Supper – namely, the washing of the disciples' feet.

Peter, as usual, totally misses the point of what Jesus is doing. He thinks that Jesus is humbling himself before his disciples, taking on the work of a household slave. But, Jesus' response to him hints at the true meaning of this ritual: "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me." The *inheritance* of which Jesus speaks is eternal life. He is saying, "Unless you allow me to empty myself and demonstrate my selfless love for you, you cannot have eternal life with me." He's not talking about just *washing feet*; he's talking about *dying on the cross*! That's what this ritual is all about! It's not a Master showing his disciples how to be humble; it's the Lord of Life symbolically showing how he is going to give over his life for love of his disciples and for all of humanity. And, importantly, after he's done with the washing, Jesus says, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." He doesn't mean that they should *literally* wash other people's feet, or that they should literally

die on a cross. He means, "Love one another as I have loved you," both by serving one another's needs and by offering yourselves in sacrifice for one another. The Eucharist is also supposed to contain that same symbolic meaning. When Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," we should understand that command as a call not just to participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist, but also to imitate his self-giving love by the way we serve one another and offer ourselves in sacrifice for one another.

In a moment, I'm going to wash the feet of a few of our parishioners, repeating that symbolic action that Jesus did for his disciples. Later, during the Eucharistic Prayer, I will offer up bread and wine at the altar, again repeating what Jesus said and did at the last Supper. Let us see and understand the spiritual meaning of these symbolic actions, both of which draw us into the *mystery of the Cross*. And, let us strive to imitate the Lord's example – loving one another and offering our lives for one another, as he has done for us.