

Jesus gave us the Eucharist so that we could truly be his disciples

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On this Holy Thursday night, we find ourselves gathered for the Mass of the Lord's Supper. And even in this majestic cathedral, we share in the intimacy of that Upper Room where Jesus celebrated the Passover with his apostles. We share in this intimacy not just because we read about it or imagine it. Through this liturgy, the events of that night before Jesus died come alive for us. We are invited in, we sit at the table with the Lord and his closest followers. He is with us, and we are with him.

And what do we experience, what does our Lord give to us as we join him? First, he calls all of us to discipleship, to the intimacy of sharing in his mission of love and mercy. In a very deliberate way, during the supper Jesus took on the role of a servant. In an act of humble service, he knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples, telling them, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." Our Lord is showing his followers what discipleship really means: humble service, mercy, love. He tells them, "You ought to wash one another's feet." If we are to be his disciples, if we truly wish to enjoy intimate friendship with Jesus, then we must be people of service, people of mercy.

So tonight we must all ask ourselves: Are we really willing to help and serve others, especially the poor and those in need among us? Are we willing to wash the feet of our neighbor, do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, comfort the afflicted, visit the sick and imprisoned? Are we people of mercy? Are we ready to become like Jesus, meek and humble of heart? If we do take to heart this example of Jesus, if we do wash each other's feet, then we can indeed become his friends, his co-workers, sharers in his work of redemption.

But then Jesus returns to the table, and invites us into an even more intimate communion, the communion of the Eucharist. Remember, they were gathered for the Passover to commemorate the deliverance of the Chosen People from slavery in Egypt. On the cross, Jesus will bring to fulfillment what was foreshadowed in that first Passover. He will take upon himself the sins of the world and make himself the definitive Passover sacrifice. He will make it possible for us to pass from sin and death to new life and resurrection.

And what Jesus would do upon the cross he now gives to his followers in the Eucharist. In one of the earliest passages from the New Testament, Paul tells us what happened: "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, 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.'" Here we recognize the words that are the heart of every Mass we celebrate, the moment when Jesus gives his body and blood to us, when his death and resurrection are re-presented for the sake of our salvation. In an act of supreme mercy, Jesus lays down his life for us on the altar, just as he did upon the cross. He invites us to draw near, to be one with him, to receive him as our spiritual nourishment, so that we may abide in him and he in us.

As we celebrate this Eucharist tonight, remembering that first Eucharistic feast, our hearts are moved to thanksgiving. Eucharist means "thanksgiving," and we give thanks for the sacrifice

which Jesus made for each and every one of us, the gift of his very life. Every moment should be filled with gratitude before the Lord who saves us. But the Eucharist also changes us. Whenever Jesus spoke or touched another whose heart was open, they were healed and transformed. Jesus speaks and enters our hearts now through the Eucharist in a personal and intimate way, and we must allow him to transform us as well. He becomes one with us so we might be one with him, like him in holiness and love. Through our communion with Jesus in the Eucharist, we can become those people of mercy that Jesus calls us to be. We can readily and gladly wash the feet of others, show mercy to others, give our lives for others. Jesus gave us the Eucharist so that we could truly be his disciples. In a word, we must become what we receive.

But there is one more gift that Jesus gives to his people at that Last Supper: the gift of the ordained priesthood. After offering the Eucharist, Jesus commanded his apostles: "Do this in remembrance of me." He configures them to himself in a new priesthood, a priesthood that will continue our Lord's saving work of mercy among his people until the end of the world. Out of love for us, Jesus empowered the apostles and their successors to continue the One Sacrifice that brings salvation to the whole world. They become co-workers of our Lord in the vineyard, servants of all in the image and likeness of their Master.

The priesthood too is a gift of our Lord's mercy. Through the priesthood, the saving word of God is proclaimed, bringing the light of truth to our darkness. Through the priesthood, the eternal sacrifice of Jesus is made present to us at every Mass and even in our intimate prayer before our Eucharistic Lord. Through the priesthood, Christ forgives our sins and strengthens us in our weakness. He continues to shepherd his flock and guides it to the running waters of his grace. Through the priesthood, Jesus remains among his people, not leaving them orphans but abiding with them always. Let us pray for our priests and ask our High Priest to send us the priests we need to strengthen us in holiness.

Dear friends, Jesus invites us to intimate communion with him this night, but it doesn't end here. From the Upper Room, we must follow Jesus to Gethsemane, where he will be betrayed and handed over for us. Let us stay with him and keep watch, wherever we are, as Jesus takes upon himself our sins and those of the whole world. Let everything we do tonight prepare us to walk with him and stand by him at the cross, so that we may share eventually in his blessed Resurrection.