

**“He loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.”**

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Holy Thursday  
Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

“Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.”

He loved them to the end. That comment from John tells us everything we need to know about Holy Thursday, about this last Passover supper that Jesus would share with his disciples. Love had brought him into the world when he took our human flesh in the Incarnation. And love moved him throughout his life and ministry. And now, out of supreme love for his followers, he shows how far that love would actually go.

Jesus knows what is coming. He knows that his life will be poured out, spent for the sake of his people, and he gives to us a living sign of that love. During the supper, Paul tells us he took bread, and he said, “This is my body.” And taking the cup of wine, he said “This is my blood.” He gives them, and us, his life, his very self as a foretaste of all that he would do on the cross. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus places his body and blood into our hands, he makes himself food and drink for us, so that he might abide with us and we with him. He could not bear to be apart from us, so great was his love, and he undoubtedly knew that we would fall apart without him. So he gives us this enduring sign of his living presence, his abiding love.

Jesus knew our need, and he gives himself to us in the Eucharist to strengthen us in our weakness, to accompany us in our loneliness, and even as a foretaste of heaven itself. Christ in the Eucharist will always be our companion on the way of our earthly journey, sustaining us when we grow weak and lifting us up when we falter. This is no mere symbol; it is Jesus Christ the Son of God, under the appearances of bread and wine. When John says, “He loved them to the end,” he isn’t just talking about loving them to the end of his life. Loving them to the end means loving them to the fullest extent of his divine life, bestowing on them the greatest gift he could possibly give – himself. Jesus has promised, “I will be with you always,” and through the Eucharist he fulfills that promise to his Church.

In this very act of giving the Eucharist, Jesus also forms a new priesthood for the sake of his people. In the old covenant, priests offered lambs and bulls as a sacrifice to God, not because God needed them but because we needed to give him something of ours. But as soon as he gives the Eucharist, he tells the apostles, “Do this in remembrance of me.” He creates a new priesthood for a new covenant, no longer sacrificing lambs or bulls, but offering the true Lamb of God. “He loved them to the end.” In creating a new priesthood, Jesus assures that his people will be taught, and shepherded, and nourished. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest acts in the person of Christ in a special way. Christ remains among his people in the person of the priest, through his ministry, and especially through the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The priest, who has all the same weaknesses of the apostles, who is a sinner like all of us, is nevertheless “another Christ,” called by Jesus to love his people to the end. The priesthood is not given to a man for himself, but is given to a man for the Church. In all his ministry, the priest is an instrument of Christ’s love, an instrument of his salvation.

Finally, at this doorway leading to his passion and death, Jesus gives one more gift to his Church. I’m sure it amazed his disciples, but at a certain moment during the supper he sets aside his outer garment, kneels down, and washes their feet, as if he were a household servant. He tells them straight out that this must now be the pattern for their lives as his followers: “If I, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet....As I have done for you, you should also do.” Here again Jesus is loving them to the end. Peter protests, but Jesus makes it clear that he must wash us, we need him to purify us, we must allow ourselves to be washed clean by him if we wish to belong to him.

And he also gives us our marching orders: just as he has been a servant, we must now become servants to one another. Jesus was willing to do the work of a slave. Are we as willing? Do we desire to give of ourselves for the good of our neighbor, even those who are hard to love?

Jesus was pointing his apostles toward his most definitive service, his death on the cross. He was preparing them for what he was about to do, and for what they too would have to do. "There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends." Jesus will soon lay down his life, because he loved us to the end, to the nth degree, and he invites us to follow his example of self-giving love. There is no other way to be a follower of Christ. There is no other way to share in his Kingdom. He shows us that if we would partake of his body and blood, and abide in him, then we must also love as he loved. The Eucharist calls us to service, and even to sacrifice. That's what it means to "love to the end."

My brothers and sisters, on this solemn night we are blessed more richly than we can know. Jesus calls us together around the altar, just as the apostles gathered at the Passover table, and he forms us as his Church by our participation in the Eucharist. As Pope St. John Paul II said, "The Eucharist makes the Church." We are served by a priesthood that is born out of Christ's own sacrifice. And we are shown the way of true discipleship and friendship with Christ: loving service to each other. As we continue our celebration and accompany Jesus on his journey to the cross, let us enter more deeply into the mystery of his sacrifice. "He loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end."