

**“Take and drink, this is the new covenant in my blood.”**

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

*Apr. 13, 2017*

*Holy Thursday  
Cathedral of St. Mary  
Fargo, ND*

When Jewish people gather for the Passover, which is described in the first reading tonight, the youngest child asks: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” And the head of the family answers the question by describing how God saved his people from slavery and brought them into the Promised Land.” Tonight we find ourselves with Jesus at his last Passover supper, and we discover that this night is different than all other nights. In fact, this night will change everything.

At that Passover supper, in several ways, Jesus revealed the profound depths of his love for his disciples. And he also commissioned them to participate in his work of love. Jesus clearly knew that he would soon depart from his followers, his little flock. But he wanted to reassure them and ensure that they would never be alone. In the context of their supper, Paul tells us that Jesus took bread and gave it to them, saying, “Take and eat, this is my body that is for you.” And with the chalice of wine, he said, “Take and drink, this is the new covenant in my blood.” In anticipation of his impending sacrifice on the cross, Jesus gives himself, wholly and entirely to his followers, to his Church.

With this mysterious gift to his followers, Jesus establishes a pattern for the life of his Church forever. Until the end of time, the disciples of Jesus will be a Eucharistic people. Until the day of the Lord’s coming, we will enter into the deepest communion with him through this great sacrament of his body and blood, the Eucharistic sacrifice. From that moment on, the Church would exist as a communion in Christ through the sacrament of the Eucharist. As Pope St. John Paul II teaches us, “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist.” And this makes perfect sense, because the Eucharist is Christ himself, and there can be no Church apart from Christ.

Jesus gives to us more than a ritual meal, more than a story of past deeds of power. In the Eucharist, he gives us himself. Just as he would give his life upon the cross, now in the Eucharist he makes a complete self-offering so that his followers and his Church would never be separated from him, so that we would always draw our life and strength from his sacrifice and resist the temptation to “go it alone.” As Jesus told his followers in John chapter 6, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.” But, he goes on to say, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” So yes, this night is certainly different than all other nights. Our Lord gives himself in a definitive and intimate way, in a way that will forever determine the course of our history. He gives himself so we might always live in him.

And to ensure that this gift of his life would be present to his Church perpetually, he gives to the Church a new priesthood. No longer a priesthood that offers bulls and goats, but one that offers a lamb, the perfect lamb of sacrifice, the Lamb of God. After giving the Eucharist to his apostles, Jesus says very directly, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Do this. Continue what I have begun, carry on this work that I have entrusted to you. Jesus creates a priesthood that would allow him to be present in grace through the Eucharist, that would allow him to continue to offer mercy and healing to his people. These priests of the new covenant would be *alteri Christi*, other Christs. They would act *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, as his instruments and ambassadors. St. Augustine has a beautiful expression. He calls the priesthood “the office of love,” the *amoris officium*. And it is that. These priests of of the New Covenant are invited to share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ himself, who is the great high priest. They will be shepherds after the heart of the Good Shepherd, ministers, servants of the People of God.

But one more action of our Lord makes this night different than all others. Jesus puts on an apron, kneels down, and washes the feet of his disciples. Peter and the others were appalled at this, but Jesus

insists. He has come as a servant, and he shows his followers that they too must serve the needs of others. It might seem incongruous that Jesus would act in this way, and that the Church would make so much of his actions. But what Jesus did that night, and what he commands his followers to do is revolutionary. The Son of God, the One by whose word the universe and all that is in it came into existence, lowers himself to wash his disciples' feet. Jesus isn't putting on an act by doing this. He is showing us who he is, and who God is. By this act, and by his death on the cross, Jesus reveals what St. Bonaventure called the "humility of God" – a God who was not content to live in a far-off heaven, but who poured out his love upon us and sought our love in return. It is a self-giving love that prompts God to stoop down, to pursue us in spite of our rejection, to share our life and our death, so that we might share in his life and glory. Kneeling there, Jesus revealed God's humble love for sinful humanity.

And he is also teaching them, and us, that we too must be servants to one another. While the world around him was consumed with self-interest and self-gain, Jesus came to give, to serve, to pour out his life for us. He did this in the Eucharist, but he also shows us that in everyday ways, we must be servants, ready to give of ourselves for the sake of others. What we receive in the Eucharist, we must live in the washing of feet, in whatever form that might take. The way of the Church, and the way of every follower of Christ, must now be one of sacrificial love and service toward others. In this way, God will work through us to conquer the world and draw it gently into his Kingdom.

Why is this night different from all other nights? On this holy night, we see unfolding before us the full mystery of God's self-giving love, given in the Eucharist, perpetuated in the priesthood, and revealed in the washing of feet. As we move with our Lord to the Garden of Gethsemane, we will see him hand over his life for our sakes. May we never fail to receive his love and to share it with others.