

Holy Thursday 2023

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” For many years now, I have pondered that question each Holy Thursday, and it never grows old for me ... nor, I hope, for you. Holy Week reveals the fullness of God’s love and mercy in what Jesus has done for us, for ME. Think about what it was like for Peter or James or Andrew or the others to hear Jesus say ... this is my Body, which will be given up FOR YOU ... this is my Blood, poured out FOR YOU. *All of mercy begins with this gift of the Lord’s life ... a freely-given sacrifice on the Cross that is prefigured, and we might say, solemnly promised, at the Last Supper.* The Twelve knew this familiar Passover ritual well, sharing without fully understanding that this was the very turning point of all of human history, the redemption that every heart longed for, no matter how vaguely. Widely-scattered hints and foreshadowings about salvation are harmonized at this Supper of the Lord into three inseparably-linked mysteries: the Eucharist, the priesthood, and loving service, symbolized by Thursday’s washing of the disciples’ feet and fulfilled on Friday’s Cross.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” The verb translated as “understand” means not just to an intellectual grasp of a concept, having a clear idea. Rather, Jesus literally asks His Apostles: Do you realize ... that is, does it become real in you, does it come to life in you ... does it make a difference for you? “Do you understand” is a question not only about how we think ... it is about how we live, about how we DO THIS in memory of Him, not just at Mass, but in our daily lives.

Holy Thursday draws us into the very heart of salvation history, drawing the unmistakable parallels between the Last Supper and the Passover in the Book of Exodus. In Egypt, God heard His people’s cries and intervened through His servant Moses to set them free and give them a new future. Through the Blood of the Paschal Lamb, they are protected from the death that would befall the first-born of the Egyptians. The night before this saving event takes place, God gives them the ritual they are to observe ever after: to feed with unleavened bread on the flesh of the Lamb. So too, at the Last Supper, Christ, the

new Moses sent by the Father to teach the New Law of Love, leads the true Exodus from the slavery of sin and death. He sheds His blood – the true Lamb of God – the first-born of the Father Who takes death to Himself to transform it into the passage to life. And again, the night before the Passion of the Cross, Jesus gives them the new ritual they are to observe ever after, and He consecrates the Apostles as priests of this new Covenant ... to do this in memory of Him ... so that through the ages, we might be able to share in this Gift of Life. As the Israelites were fed in the desert by the manna, so we are continually nourished with something far greater, the Living Bread come down from the Father.

All of that connects clearly as prophecy and fulfillment. But John vividly remembers something else about that night: *Jesus washes the feet of the Apostles*. For John, the meaning is clear: what Christ is doing is the true Passover, the reality that Moses could only point to from afar. Jesus is about to **pass** from this world to the Father, to **pass over from death to life** – and He does it precisely by emptying Himself, passing from self-possession to self-gift, passing from being Teacher and Master to being Servant and Least. He not only comes to free His people from slavery, but He does the work of the slave HIMSELF on their behalf. He unites Himself with the enslaved, just as Moses had done in the Old Testament, and even more, as He will do in taking on the slavery of sin at the Cross. *Jesus passes from His earlier words: The Father is always with Me – to those chilling words of Good Friday, where Christ completely identifies Himself with the power of sin to alienate us from the Father: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned Me?”* This passing over, this self-emptying, is symbolized by removing His outer garments ... as the next day He will submit to being stripped of His garments ... and bending low, as he will lay down to be nailed to the Cross, to serve us. And all of this is also contained in the Eucharist, where Jesus gives Himself to the Apostles that night, and continually gives Himself to us in the same Eucharist across all these ages, until He returns in His risen glory at the end of all things.

How often would Jesus say to us, as He did to Peter: “You may not understand now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” We pray for that patience and trust tonight, when the mystery of faith is hard for us to grasp. But even without fully understanding it, we can still follow the path Jesus shows us ... to pass over to the Father ... not only at the end of our lives here, when we hope to share in Christ’s risen life; but in each act of love, passing over in the same way – by going out of ourselves, passing from self-possession to self-gift, *from being those who wish to receive mercy to those who wish to bestow mercy*. In receiving this Sacrament, Communion happens – we are made one Body with and in Jesus, and our lives are forevermore interwoven together – Christ and each of us, and each of us with one another.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” Does it come to life for you, does it become real in you and make a difference? *Christ has passed over and passes into us, tonight, in the Eucharist, that we may answer that question with our lives – so that as he has done, we will also do, in memory of Him.*