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Holy Thursday
Mass of the Lord's Supper
March 24, 2005

Tonight's solemn celebration of the Lord's Supper commemorates two great mysteries and gives us a practical example for our meditation. Tonight we celebrate the Institution of the Holy Eucharist in which Jesus Christ begins to complete the ultimate meaning of the Passover. At the Last Supper Jesus definitively revealed Himself as Lamb of God who would be sacrificed on the first Good Friday for our sins. At the Supper He gives Himself – His Body and Blood – in the great mystery of faith – as our food for eternal life.

At that same Supper, Jesus establishes, also, the Sacrament of Holy Orders by entrusting to the apostles, as the first priests of the New Covenant, the continuation of the living Sacrifice of the Mass.

Finally, Jesus by Himself assumes the form of a slave and sets out to wash the feet of his disciples, giving them the "mandatum novum," a New Commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.

Last Fall the Year of the Eucharist began. The Holy Father in his apostolic letter "Mane Nobiscum Domine," wrote that it was not his intention to place upon pastors additional tasks to fulfill, but that this time of reflection on the Holy Eucharist should be primarily an occasion for us to experience a deepening of our interior life focused on the Eucharist.

Tonight's Holy Thursday liturgy is the most important celebration of that sublime mystery. The sacred liturgy is not just a dramatization, or a historical look back at events in Christ's life. It is a prayerful, grace-filled action by which we "make present" the realities, the mysteries, that we celebrate.

We must seek always a deeper participation in the Church's liturgy. This participation to which the Second Vatican Council referred when it called us to **a full, active, conscious participation** in the liturgy is not primarily in terms of liturgical functions such as lector or server, or extraordinary minister, or usher or musician. These things are very important and meaningful, but they clearly involve a limited number of persons.

The action of the liturgy, rather, is an action into which we **all** must enter each time we celebrate the sacred mysteries. The action happens at the altar but must find a resonance in our heart and mind. The ebb and flow of readings and response, of word and sacrament, of penitence, petition, praise and thanks, in word and in song, is not restricted to a few who stand in or near the sanctuary.

Every heart is called. All must be taught by God. Even those who do not take part in the Holy

Communion in the body and blood of Christ – for example our Catechumens and Candidates who have not yet been fully initiated into the Church, are called to bear witness in faith to the truth of the Holy Eucharist, made present at Holy Mass.

Each person is called to bring - in a way that is full, active, and conscious - to bring all the sacrifices of the day, the week, to the altar of sacrifice. All these interior offerings are carried here and “collected” in a way at the altar. Here a great communion of saints engulfs and surrounds us each time we celebrate. At the end of Mass (missa, a word that means “sent”) we are all sent out to love and serve the Lord.

On this feast day of the Mass in this Year of the Eucharist, let us resolve to enter in most fully – enter into the Passover of the Lord. The first Mass wherein Jesus Christ offered His Body and Blood as food and drink, was consummated a day later on Good Friday, at Calvary . It’s full hope and promise was fulfilled in the Resurrection and Ascension.

On this feast day of the Mass in this Year of the Eucharist, let us keep our minds and heart focused on the event at the altar, and also on the mystery of the Passover of Christ to new life at Easter.

Second, this Holy Thursday Mass is a celebration of the Priesthood, specifically the ordained priesthood. At the Last Supper our Lord commissioned the first priests, the apostles. After giving them His Body and Blood, he told them, “Do this in memory of me.”

The priest, though he is weak and in himself unworthy, stands “in Persona Christi Capitis – in the person of Christ, the head” of the Church. The priest offers the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of the people.

The whole people of God through Baptism participates in the Royal priesthood of Christ, the priesthood of the faithful - primarily as effective intercessors with and for one another. This is the Church’s doctrine of grace rejected historically by the Reformers but affirmed over and over again by the Church: namely, by reason of grace all the faithful become participants in the very life of the Holy Trinity and share in the action of Christ offering Himself. When we are in the “state of grace” when we live alive in Christ’s life - our sacrifices and acts of charity, done in love for Christ, become effective and meritorious, both in reparation for our sins and also for the benefit and salvation of others. We become co-redeemers. This is a priestly power entrusted to all those joined to Christ in Baptism. And the mission of the laity, in particular, is nothing less than the transformation of the world, through the universal call to holiness.

The ordained priest participates in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ the One High Priest in a way, the Second Vatican Council teaches, is different from the priesthood of the Faithful “not only in degree, but in essence.” The priest, it is most correctly said, offers the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, in union with Jesus Christ, on behalf of the people.

In the words of the Institution of the Eucharist, which St. Paul repeats in his letter to the Corinthians, our second reading tonight, the priest speaks in the first person, in the place of Christ, This MY Body; This is MY Blood.” This power is given to men, not because of any innate worthiness that makes them more equal to Christ, but explicitly because Jesus Christ, who commanded, “Do this in memory of me” has chosen it to be so! Christ chose the priest to be the image and the sacrament of His continuing priestly presence in the world. Tonight we joyously affirm the ministerial priesthood and beg the Lord for more priests to fulfill this work among us.

Finally, in a few moments, I will take up the liturgical sign of the washing of the feet that has become the venerable tradition that conveys priestly service on Holy Thursday. Tonight it will be my privilege for the first time as a bishop and shepherd among you to wash the feet of a few representatives persons of this community – a sign of charity and ministry that must become a reminder also of humility.

During this brief ritual washing – part of the traditional action of the priest who is called to serve and not be served – we are reminded of the interior change that must take place in us as we approach other people in an attitude of generosity and respect and service.

Tonight I invite you to observe this solemn ritual action with a heart that is ready to receive the *mandatum novum*, the New Commandment, to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Make your reflection on this action, done by me as one who is called to be teacher and shepherd, an occasion for the interior renewal of your own commitment to serve other people. Pray for me that my service as bishop will be honest and authentic: day by day more loving.

On behalf of Bishop Boland, I wish you God's richest blessing in these Holy Days. May we be sustained by the Bread of eternal life as we look with hope to Easter!