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A Homily for Holy Thursday

The Easter Triduum begins with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday and lasts until Easter Sunday.

Posted February 2007

There is in every man a desire to perpetuate himself. The impulse is as old as humanity itself. The Pharaohs built their pyramids.

The famous Taj Mahal marks the tomb of the beloved wife of the Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan. President Kennedy is remembered by an eternal flame on an Arlington hillside. More important than all these earthy monuments is the fact that men can live on in their children and whenever the miracle of birth takes place we have proud parents vying with each other to point out their resemblances that come from one family or the other. Strange as this may seem, God had exactly the same idea long before human beings began the study of inherited traits.

God sent one man into the world who was so much like the Father that he was equal to him. The man from Nazareth was big-hearted in a human way – he supplied so much bread for a hungry people in the desert that the tired Apostles had to gather up twelve baskets of fragments; he wept when his friend Lazarus died; he had great sympathy for all those who suffered, whether it be physical illness or mental anguish. He was also big-hearted also in a divine way – he beckoned angry winds and seas to be still; he gave new life to those already dead; he reconciled sinful men and women with a loving Father, and he embraced the terrors of a Gethsemane night and a gruesome afternoon execution because he knew men needed him more than they would every fully understand.

That men may never forget his love and his sacrifice he perpetuated himself in two ways – in his priesthood and in the mystery of his Eucharistic sign, his body and his blood. Although preceded by many subtle insights no human could have foreseen how God would share himself with men. His is the only priesthood that exists but in every generation he selects ordinary men to share in that same priesthood – to be a living witness to him by their very presence in the community, to offer again his sacrifice in his memory, to reconcile sinners to his Father in his name, to perpetuate him further by taking very ordinary bread and wine and giving to his faithful people his body and blood. The priesthood and the Eucharist are inseparable; one cannot have one without the other. Today, in remembering Christ's Last Supper, we celebrate the anniversary of the institution of each of these sacraments. The choice is clearly ours. The pagan philosophy of life is, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." Christ's invitation reads, "Eat and drink that you may live." "The pledge of future glory," the Church calls the Eucharist Christ perpetuating himself among us by enabling us, with our multiple faults and failings and imperfections, to be incorporated, embodied into him through the sacrament. Christ lives in us and we live in Christ. And in this way we too fulfill that uncanny impulse to perpetuate ourselves, not by any crumbling monuments of stone or even through our children, lovable as they may be, but by running to the Savior who said "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever."

Amen