

Homily Holy Thursday, April 13, 2017

As we gather tonight to celebrate the Last Supper and its spiritual legacy, the Eucharist, it may seem ironic that the Gospel that is read does not include an account of the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last supper. Those institution accounts are included in the Gospel reading of the Passion narratives of the other three evangelists used on Palm Sunday of each year.

Tonight our Gospel passage describes one part of Jesus' Last Supper gathering with His apostles. John, in fact, did not include the detailed account of the institution of the Eucharist, suitably because in writing the last of the Gospels the description of the institution of the Eucharist was fully accomplished. John's treatment of the Holy Eucharist was accomplished by inclusion of Jesus' lengthy teaching on the meaning of the future Eucharist which followed an earlier miracle of the multiplication of loaves of bread and the feeding of the multitudes. The Church, however, does remind us of the Last Supper institution of the Eucharist by using St. Paul's brief description in our second reading tonight.

What John does include as part of the description of the event of the Last Supper is the gesture of the washing of the feet as described in our Gospel. It was a two-fold gesture. Jesus took on the task of a servant as an expression of His own humble service to His closest followers. Also, He was commending to them an example of how they should treat one another. They were to consider themselves as humble servants of one another, washing one another's feet in all sort of ways in word and deed. And the foundation of humble service of one another would enable them to better serve all whom they would eventually seek to draw to belief in Jesus.

In our Mass tonight we will replicate the gesture of Jesus. The practice in the Church has a long history, and in this past century it became an optional part of the Holy Thursday liturgy. The washing of the feet in this Mass draws its meaning from what Jesus did at the Last Supper. When I wash the feet of representatives of our parish community I am reminding myself and you that I was assigned here to serve with humility. Of course, I am to serve Jesus but also, in His name, to serve all of you. Secondly, this expression of service is to remind all of you that my service to you is so that you can better serve one another in this community and others in the community beyond. I am washing your feet so that you can wash the feet of one another here and so many beyond these walls.

In providing the option of including the washing of the feet in the Holy Thursday liturgy the Church cautions that it should not overshadow the most important aspect of our

celebration. That is the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood that maintains the presence of the Eucharist. We accent this part of the commemoration with the solemn procession with the Blessed Sacrament at the end of Mass, when the Blessed Sacrament will be taken to Conger Hall where adoration of the Blessed Sacrament will occur until midnight. That gives all of us a chance to reflect on the wonderful gift of the Eucharist. And our regular place of worship, where we maintain the Eucharistic presence throughout the year will be devoid of that presence over the next couple of days.

The catechism has a rather packed description of why Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, shortly before His death. Jesus wanted to perpetuate His coming sacrifice of the cross until the end of time. Jesus wanted to give His Church a memorial of His suffering and death. Jesus wanted to give a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity and a Paschal banquet in which Christ, Himself, would be actually consumed, and the mind would be filled with grace and Jesus would give us a pledge of heaven. Indeed, the Eucharist makes present and celebrates the most important humble service of Jesus Christ, His suffering, death and resurrection so that we might be forgiven of our sins and live a new life as the adopted children of God filled with the Holy Spirit.

While the ritual of the washing of the feet is optional the message of that ritual and its essential connection to the Eucharist is not. The most important way that I continue to wash your feet is to celebrate the Eucharist with faith, obedience, reverence and humility. And the most important way that you wash one another's feet and find the power (the grace) to wash the feet of others is through participation in the Eucharist.

I think sometimes we look upon our participation in the Eucharist and the Mass in too private or individual of a way. Of course our full and active participation in the Eucharist calls upon our deep personal faith, our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. However, our full participation in all the prayers, hymns and gestures is our gift to those who gather with us. Our efforts allow our Eucharist to better effect that sign of unity and bond of charity of which the catechism spoke in describing why Jesus instituted this Eucharist. If we are present, recollected, attentive, verbal and fully engaged in the Eucharist we are humbly washing the feet of our brothers and sisters. If we are mere passive attendees, or worse, absent we aren't.