

HOLY THURSDAY, 2021 – ST. VINCENTS', COBLESKILL NY

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 This day shall be a memorial feast celebrating the Passover

Psalms 116 "Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ"

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Do this in remembrance of me ...

as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord.

Alleluia Verse: "I give you a new commandment, says the Lord: love one another as I have loved you."

Gospel: John 13:1-16 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, and commands them to do likewise.

Tonight we are celebrating three things:

The **Eucharist** which has its roots at the Last Supper & the Passover which we are observing this week with our Jewish brothers & sisters;

The **commandment** of Jesus to wash each other's feet [i.e. to serve & love one another]; & the **priestly ministry** that flows from Jesus' own identity as the High Priest of the New Covenant.

It is not easy to reflect on all three in one liturgy, but I hear all those themes in this song

♪ *A-mén, El Cuerpo de Cristo. A-mén, La Sangre del Señor.*

Eating your body, drinking your blood, we become what we receive. Amén, A-mén. ♪

El Cuerpo de Cristo - Spanish for "The Body of Christ" - BOTH the host we receive at Communion, AND the body of Christ that we **are** as his disciples.

La Sangre del Señor - The blood of the Lord: BOTH the consecrated wine at Mass, AND the **life** of Jesus within us that gives us the grace to live & love as his disciples.

The first verse sings about the Paschal Mystery, the core of the Eucharist:

We remember your dying & your rising. Y contigo, Señor, resucitamos. [with you, Lord, we rise]

The 2nd reading tonight is from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians. It describes the same event we heard in the reading of the Passion of Mark on Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, the 1st Eucharist. Holy Thursday recalls that event.

But John's Gospel - which we heard tonight - does not have the story of Jesus taking bread and wine and saying, "This is my body, this is my blood." The Gospel of John assumes that everyone knows that story, since Christians had been celebrating the Eucharist for 70 years or more before it was written down.

When this Gospel tells the story of the Last Supper, it tells about how Jesus did what only a slave in his culture would do, he washed the feet of the ones he was eating with. Jesus lived his whole life in service.

He humbled himself to wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper.

He humbled himself to be born of Mary as one of us.

The Lord of life emptied himself to accept false condemnation & death on a cross.

We celebrate all of those acts of service on Holy Thursday.

If we are to be true to the vision of Jesus, we cannot just contemplate and worship the Body of Christ, we must **become** the Body of Christ & imitate the humble service of the Son of God who emptied himself to become one of us.

It's not enough to receive communion, we must be in communion with Jesus and one another; we cannot just go to Church, we are called & given the grace to **become** the Church, the Body of Christ. We may be dispensed from the obligation to go to church in person during this time of pandemic, but that is because of the greater **obligation** to love one another by keeping each other safe.

St Augustine at the Easter Vigil, held up the consecrated bread & the precious blood of Christ & said, "See who you are, be what you receive." Pope Benedict quoted those very words in 2007. Many others have said the same thing, including Thomas Aquinas.

When we eat the bread of communion we promise to serve one another. In a way, we eat the Church. When we reverence the consecrated wine as the blood of Christ, even as we hope for the time when we can drink from the cup again after the pandemic, we agree to walk in the footprints of Jesus. In a way, we drink his cross. We live the truth I sang: "we become what we receive, amen, amen."

The next verse sings of the meaning of priesthood: *Now we offer the sacrifice you gave us. Te_ofrecemos, Señor, todo lo que somos. [We offer you, Lord, all that we are.]* To do this is a priestly ministry - a ministry which imitates the service of Christ, the Priest.



Bethany Ministries Franciscan Spirituality Group

That's how I understand the meaning of my ministry - As a priest, I am called to service -- not to status. So is a bishop. Pope Francis is making that so very clear by what he says & even more by what he does. On the 1st Holy Thursday after he was elected Pope, instead of washing the feet of male clerics, he went out to the poor and washed their feet. The group included women & a Muslim.

Before I was ordained a priest, I was a deacon, like Gary. The primary ministry of a deacon is to serve. The very word in Greek means service. But I did not stop being called to serve when I received the 2nd step of Holy Orders, ordination as a presbyter. The call to serve, in a way, was intensified, & someone like Gary is an example to remind me of my continuing call to serve.

My vocation & Gary's, as well as Sr. Anna & Pope Francis & Bishop Ed, is to be a sacrament, a living sign of the vocation that each of us receives at Baptism - a vocation to serve, to wash one another's feet. This does not just refer to a ritual done once a year but to the way we love each other in practical ways that are not always comfortable or easy.

It means that I need to listen to the ones Jesus loves, & to serve their needs as I am able. It is a call to forgive & to love. And this is not only the call of a priest or a deacon or a bishop or a religious sister or a pastoral leader, it is the call given to each of us through our Baptism.

You see, the priesthood of the New Testament is never given to an individual alone. To be a priest is always to be united with Jesus, who is the only individual in the whole New Testament who is called a priest. To do priestly ministry is always to do it as a member of a priestly people. Some of us are ordained to serve, to lead and to preside so that all of the Baptized can see what we are all called to do in our own way.

To be part of a priestly people means that each of us is called to feed the hungry, and work for peace & justice for all, and even to change the structures and institutions that cause starvation and poverty, racism & violence and systemic injustice.



Members of the Black Catholic congregation celebrating Peter's birthday

To "wash feet" also means that we are called to receive as well as give, to be Christ for others and to let others love us as Christ loves us.

I remember when I was in campus ministry at St. Bonaventure University. I was responsible for organizing the Holy Thursday Liturgy. I asked representatives of all the groups on campus to have their feet washed at the Mass. One of those I asked was an administrator named Larry. He was hesitant, like Peter in the Gospel. I thought it might be because he didn't want anyone to touch his feet - it would make him feel too vulnerable - but he told me that he had not been to Church in a long time and did not feel *worthy* to have his feet washed.

I told him that it was not a question of being worthy or not, it was about being humble enough to receive the love of Christ. He thought about it and decided to do it, & it changed his whole life. After that Holy Thursday, he went back to regular practice of his faith and he and his wife even became presenters at retreats and gave talks about God's love and acceptance. Larry and his wife Bonnie moved from occasionally going to church to becoming church.

But what really gives meaning and power to the Eucharist and to priestly ministry is the *way* Jesus loves and serves and calls us to do likewise. Another verse of the hymn says it this way: *We find you when we serve the poor & lowly. A ti mismo servimos en los pobres.* [You yourself we serve in the poor]

The ritual we are about to do makes the saving power of Christ present for us. It makes the consequences of receiving communion visible. In a way, we are given more chances to be the presence of Christ in the world during these difficult times.

We proclaim our faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist by the way we "wash each other's feet" in our daily life. That is how we make him present outside of the walls of a church building, and recognize his real presence in the ones we serve. We are living our call to be part of the priesthood of Jesus when we love one another as he loves us.

All of the themes of this night come together in the words we will hear during the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass: "Do this in memory of me!" They are a command to continue to celebrate the Eucharist, as it has been celebrated for 20 centuries, but they are much more! They are an invitation to continue the priestly ministry of Jesus by loving and serving one another - to see

ourselves as a priestly people who see Christ in others even as we are called to be Christ for each other and the world. But most of all, we need to hear them as a command to live the faith we profess: To wash each other's feet by Loving one another; forgiving one another; serving one another as Christ has done for us.

I'd like to end with a poem which a friend of mine put in a book he wrote called: "21 Ways to Worship, A Guide to Eucharistic Adoration" by my college classmate & friend, Vinny Flynn. It was written by his daughter, Erin.

What use is it if I receive You and do not bear You to the world?

"Mary went in haste...."

What use is it if I join myself to You in love, but do not love my brother or sister?

"They'll know you are my disciples ..."

Is it even possible to be truly united to Goodness and not share that goodness?

What kind of union is it, if I stay my same self thereafter?

Do not allow me to remain as I am, Jesus.

*Help me to prepare my heart for true union with You,
a union that will reveal You to the world uniquely through me.*

For what use is it if You come to me and I refuse to see you in my neighbor?

What use is it, Lord, if You fill me and I do not overflow?

♪ A-men. El Cuerpo de Cristo. A-men. La Sangre del Senor.

Eating your body, drinking your blood, we become what we receive. Amen, A-men. ♪

Links to 2 videos of the Holy Thursday Liturgy. [Some of the words in the text above are not on the video]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svdmNmeTlaA> Holy Thursday, part 1 Opening song to ¾ of homily.

[a few words are omitted from the story about a man at SBU in the homily. They are in the text]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNiuYIBbtYs>

Holy Thursday, part 2 End of homily, footwashing ritual to consecration of the wine.



Buds on a bush in Spring

Reflection during the ritual of footwashing at St. Vincent's

At this time on Holy Thursday, there is usually a ritual when the presider washes the feet [or hands] of several parishioners. Because of the pandemic we can't do that this year. But Deacon Gary and his wife Rose have agreed to stand in for us, and wash each others' feet, as a visible sign of the way Jesus loves us and commands us to love one another.

The ritual itself in the history of the Church was called the "Mandatum" which is Latin for "the command". It comes from the words of Jesus after he finishes washing the feet of all those present at the Last Supper. The words of that command were - and are: "As I have done, so you must do."

Gary is following that command as he washes his wife's feet. We are called to imitate this simple act, not necessarily by physically washing feet, [Although both St. Francis & St. Clare did just that] but in acts of service that are appropriate for our situations.

[Silence while Gary finishes]

To be a follower of Christ means not only to serve as he served, to wash the feet of others in many ways far beyond the literal imitation of Jesus. It also means to let myself be served and loved by Christ and by the ones he puts in our lives. Jesus himself, the week before his death, had his feet washed by Mary of Bethany. She washed **his** feet with perfumed oil and dried them with her hair – to prepare him for his final act of service, his final act of humbling himself – his death on a cross.

In the Gospel of Luke, another woman washes the feet of Jesus with her tears. I wonder if Jesus didn't get the idea to wash feet from these women. That's why Gary & Rose are both having their feet washed and washing the feet of their spouse.

We, too, are called to receive the love & service of Christ, often through one another, and then to pass it on by serving and loving as we have been loved & served.



A longer meditation from the weekly prayer meeting based on the 11th step of AA

JESUS WASHES THE FEET OF HIS DISCIPLES & COMMANDS THEM TO DO LIKEWISE.

The Word of the Father, the Son of God, humbled himself to be born of Mary.

Jesus humbled himself to wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper.

The Lord of life humbled himself to accept death on a cross.

We celebrate that humility and act it out on Holy Thursday when we do the ritual of footwashing.

The ritual itself in the history of the Church was called the “Mandatum” which is Latin for the “the command”. It comes from the words of Jesus after he finishes washing the feet of all those present at the Last Supper, including Peter who resisted at first, and Judas who didn’t understand or follow the command. The words of that command were - and are: “As I have done, so you must do.”

What does that mean for me and you today? Each of us must be humble enough to have our feet washed, to accept the love of Christ, to receive his service. Like Peter, we sometimes resist. We would rather be the one who washes the feet of others. We often find it easier to help others than to admit that we need the help and service of others. But even Peter did not persist in his resistance. He let Jesus wash his feet and because he humbled himself, he was empowered to serve the new people of God, to wash the feet of both Jews & Gentiles, even though he resisted that command and had to let Paul wash his feet by convincing him to recognize that all are called to be disciples of Christ.

To be a follower of Christ means not only to serve as he served, to wash the feet of others, in many ways beyond the literal imitation of Jesus. It also means to let myself be served and loved, first by Christ and then by the ones the Spirit sends to us. Jesus himself, the week before his death, had his feet washed by Mary of Bethany while he was having supper with Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead, and with Martha, who seems to be always serving. Mary washed his feet with perfumed oil and dried them with her hair – to prepare him for his final act of service, his final act of humbling himself – his death on a cross. In the Passion of Mark, read this year on Palm Sunday, Jesus is served by a woman who anoints his head with oil two days before the Passover, in a way very similar to what he did for his disciples when he washed their feet. I wonder if Jesus didn’t get the idea to wash feet from these women.

Jesus had his feet washed in a definitive way when his Father raised him from the dead on Easter.

Peter even joined his Lord by humbling himself to accept death on a cross. But that’s not the end of the story. Peter, like Jesus, was raised to life to share in the glory of Christ.

When we allow the Lord to wash our feet, he is preparing us for accepting the cross, as he did, and for rising from the deaths we experience in our lives, even before the grave. And the promise given to Peter & Paul, to ML King and Mother Teresa is given to us – And he will raise you up on Eagle’s wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand.

We, too, are called to receive the love & service of Christ, often through one another, and then to pass it on by serving and loving as we have been loved.

GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION ON THE LAST WORDS OF JESUS.

“Eli, Eli, Lmana Sabachthani”

Those are the words Jesus spoke from the cross as he was being crucified. The spelling is taken from the Aramaic in a book by George M. Lamsa, *Idioms in the Bible Explained and a Key to the Original Gospel*. [Originally published separately 1931, 1971, 1985]. The spelling in this year’s Passion according to Mark [B Cycle] is *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*. They are only found in the Passion narratives of Matthew and Mark. They do not occur in the Gospels of Luke or John.

This is the passage from Matthew which has those words,

“Now from the 6th hour [noon] there was darkness over all the land unto the 9th hour [3 PM]. And about the 9th hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘*Eli, Eli, lmana sabachthani*’. Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, ‘This man calls for Elias [Elijah]’”...

These are the last words of Jesus from the cross. In fact, they are the only words he speaks from the cross in Mark & Matthew. After being offered a sponge soaked with wine, which he doesn’t drink because some who were there said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down.” “Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.”

In 1933, George M. Lamsa translated the whole Bible from the Aramaic of the Peshitta. Aramaic is the language Jesus and his disciples spoke. His reflection on those words is as follows:

*“All versions of the Gospels [of Matthew & Mark] have retained these words in the original tongue [Aramaic] and given them a different meaning [than my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?]. Matthew, according to the Eastern version, does not translate them, because he wrote to the people who had seen Jesus and heard him preaching. It also seems probably that later writers did not agree on its exact meaning when they translated them into Greek. This phrase, even at present, is only used by the Aramaic speaking people in Assyria [Syria], the same language which the Galileans spoke at the time of our Lord. The Aramaic means, “My God, my God, **for this I was kept** (this was my destiny, I was born for this).”*

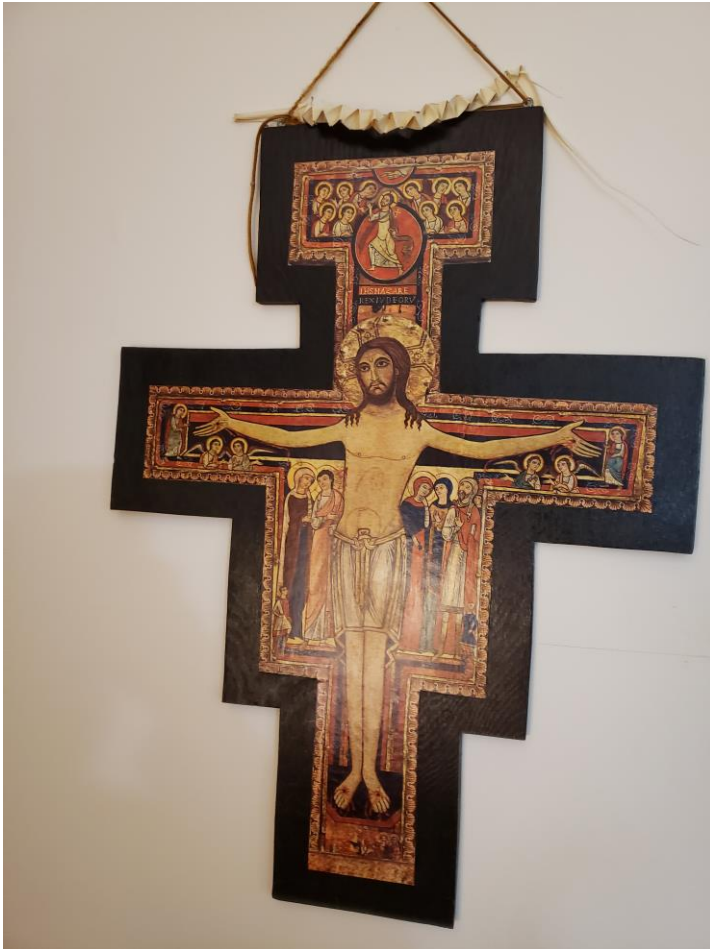
Jesus was not quoting the Psalms [Psalm 22]. If He had, he would have said these words in Hebrew instead of Aramaic, and if he had translated them from Hebrew he would have used the Aramaic word “nashatani,” which means “forsaken me,” instead of the word “shabackthani” which, in this case, means, “kept me.” Even the soldiers who stood by the cross did not understand what Jesus said in that hour of agony and suffering. They thought that he was calling on Elijah because the word Elijah in Aramaic is “Eli,” which is similar to the word for God, “Eli.”

[Peter interrupts Lamsa’s narrative with his reflection]

I have heard those words of Jesus for my whole life, and listened to them or read about them as a quotation from Psalm 22. The words of the Hebrew Psalm do indeed mean, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken [abandoned] me. They express the very human emotions of David. Yet, even in the Psalm, as we hear it sung in the Palm Sunday Liturgy, there are words of hope, “But you, O Lord, be not far from me; O my help, hasten to aid me. I will proclaim your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise him.” I believe that the words of Jesus can mean both things - “Why have you forsaken me” and “for this I was kept.” I am even of the opinion that the last words of Jesus in the Gospels of Luke & John are other forms of the ones Jesus spoke just before he died in Matthew & Mark. Luke records “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” as the words Jesus spoke just before he dies. John put the words “It is finished [accomplished]” as the last words of Jesus. I wonder if these phrases are different ways of saying, “For this I was kept” or “This was my destiny” or “I was born for this.”

[Lamsa continued]

“In those last minutes of suffering, Jesus watched the crowd, which was composed of Rabbis, Priests, men and women of Jerusalem, who had come up to watch him dying. Some were insulting him, others spitting in his face, and others calling him names and challenging his claim that he is a man of God and calling him a malefactor and sinner. Jesus only made a statement to himself and to the friends who were also standing and hiding in the crowds near the cross. He was saying that he was born for that hour, that he may bear witness to the truth and open the way for the others who were to be crucified – that was his destiny. He was saying that there was nothing else that could have given such a glorious victory as the cross.



The disciples and women who were from Galilee never for a moment could have thought that Jesus said that God had forsaken him. How could he say that when he had told his disciples that the whole world would forsake him, even they, but that the Father would be with him. How could he say that when he had told Peter that if he wished he could bring angels to fight for him, and when he said, “Father, let it be thy wish if I should drink this cup.” These words, “Eli, Eli, Imana sabachthani,” even today are used by Assyrians when they suffer and die unjustly. Instead of complaint and dissatisfaction, they leave everything to God. They believe that it is God’s desire that they should pass through such experiences.”

San Damiano Crucifix in Peter's living room