

Holy Thursday, 2014

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

Psalm 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 and the Passover; the commandment of Jesus to love one another by washing each other's feet; and the priestly ministry that flows from his 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 three 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" -that is, 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: that is, BOTH the consecrated wine we receive at Communion, 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 death & resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of his Spirit] which is the core of the Eucharist:

♪ Amén, We remember your dying and your rising.

Amén, Y contigo, Señor, resucitamos. Amén. ♪ [And with you, Lord, we rise]

The 2nd reading tonight is from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It describes the same event we heard in the reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday. 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."

He assumes that everyone knows that story, since Christians had been celebrating the Eucharist for 70 years or more before the Gospel of John was written down. When he tells the story of the Last Supper, he tells about how Jesus did what only a slave in his culture would do, he washed the feet of his friends.

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 humility of the God who emptied himself to become one of us. We can't just receive communion, we must be *in communion* with Jesus and one another; we cannot just go to Church, we are called and given the grace to *become* the Church, the Body of Christ.

St Augustine at the Easter Vigil, held up the consecrated bread and the precious blood of Christ and said, "See who you are, be what you receive." Pope Benedict quoted those very words in 2007.

When we eat the bread of communion we promise to serve one another. In a way, we eat the Church. When we drink from the cup of salvation, we agree to walk in the footprints of Jesus. In a way, we drink his cross. We live the refrain of the hymn I have sung: "we become what we receive."

The next verse sings of the meaning of priesthood:

♪ A-mén, Now we offer the sacrifice you gave us.

Amén, Te_ofrecemos, Señor, todo lo que somos. Amén. ♪ [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. That's how I understand the meaning of my ministry - I am called as a priest to service rather than status. Pope Francis is making that so very clear by what he says & even more by what he does.

My calling & his is to be a kind of *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, or on a Parish Mission or retreat, 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, and to serve their needs as I am able. And this is not only the call of a priest or a parish life director 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 one 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 lead and to preside so that all of the Baptized can see what we are all called to do in our own way.

I had a chance to live that Baptismal and priestly call this past Sunday. I was visiting someone who was in prison on my way back from a Friars' meeting near Syracuse. I had missed lunch and I was hungry, but I was not upset because I knew I was going to be meeting Christ in the person I was visiting.

And I was visiting as a friend rather than as an ordained priest. He was particularly happy to see me because when he was transferred from another prison- with two hours notice - all his belongings were lost in the trip. For the better part of a week, he did not have any clothes except what he was wearing. He needed to borrow soap, towels & deodorant. But mostly he missed the large print Bible I had sent to him.

I went there intending to serve someone in need, but I was also served. In a way, I got my feet washed. While I was waiting for my friend to come to the visiting room, an inmate at a table nearby offered me a sandwich and a bag of chips as I sat there feeling very hungry. I had not expected to be served even as I was reaching out to someone else & I was deeply moved.

To be part of a priestly people means that each of us is called to feed the hungry, and work for peace and justice for all, and even to change the structures and institutions that cause starvation and poverty and limit true freedom. It means that we are called to receive as well as give, when Christ comes to wash our feet through the most unlikely situations.

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 sings it this way:

♪ Amén, We find **you** when we serve the poor and lowly.

Amén, A ti mismo servimos en los pobres. Amén. ♪ [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. 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. 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: Love one another as I have loved you - Do **this** in memory of me!

Forgive one another as I have forgiven you - Do **this** in memory of me!

Serve one another in humility and love as I have washed your feet - do **this** in memory of me.

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?