

**Homily for Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Yesterday our Jewish colleagues throughout the world began their celebration of Passover. The first Passover seder took place last night and the second Passover seder is taking place this evening. It is not mere coincidence that our observance of Holy Thursday comes at the time of Passover. When Jesus and His Apostles, who were all Jewish, of course, gathered for what would become known as the Last Supper, it was in fact to share the Passover Seder meal.

The history of Passover is the unfolding of God's plan to free the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. When Pharaoh would not let them go, God sent various plagues upon the Egyptian people. The first nine plagues were unsuccessful in securing the freedom of the Israelites. A tenth plague would destroy all the firstborn of Egypt, so God told Moses to instruct the people of Israel to procure a lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts and the lintel of every house. Seeing this blood, the angel of

death would pass over the house. In this way, the firstborn of Israel would survive so they could create a race of loyal followers who would do God's will. The Passover meal would prepare the Israelites for their journey out of bondage into the new life God had promised.

The Hebrew word for Passover is *Pesach*, which is the root of the word *Paschal*. We refer to Jesus as our Paschal Lamb, because it is Jesus who leads us out of our slavery to sin into the life of God's kingdom. Scripture scholars tell us that Jesus is to be understood the new and greater Moses. At His Last Supper, Jesus gave the disciples the key to a new Passover. He had supper with His followers on the night He was betrayed. Jesus gave thanks over the bread and the cup and declared that the bread is His body and the wine is His blood. Jesus instructed the disciples to take part in this communion and to do it as a remembrance of what He had already done and what He was about to do. Jesus then showed His love for His disciples by washing their feet. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet was a sign of his deep love for them and of what he was about to do for all mankind by His suffering and death on the cross. He did not stop there, but instructed the disciples that He expected them to do the same for one another as He had done for them.

Our Holy Thursday liturgy commemorates three principal mysteries of our faith: the institution of the Holy Eucharist, the institution of the ministerial priesthood, and the commandment of our Lord concerning fraternal charity.

The institution of the Eucharist is clear in the narrative of the Last Supper. Interestingly, at this “Mass of the Lord’s Supper,” our Gospel reading does not tell us about the supper itself. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, where we are told of Jesus taking, blessing, and sharing the bread and wine as His Body and Blood, we have today the Gospel of Saint John, which tells us instead of the washing of the feet.

Notice that Jesus washes the feet of His disciples after He rose from supper. After giving the bread and wine to His disciples as His body and blood, Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19). After washing their feet, Jesus said, “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (John 13:15). This is called the *mandatum* in Latin because it is Jesus’ mandate that His disciples do as He did. Jesus is saying through His words as well as His actions that we are to do these

actions of love – the Eucharist and service – in memory of Him and in imitation of Him.

Our Lord's washing of His disciples' feet is commonly understood at a basic level as an example of hospitality, and humble service. It is that, but there is much more than that symbolically: Saint Jerome (*Epistle to Pope Damasus*) stated that the purpose of Christ's washing of His Disciples' feet was to prepare them for their duty to preach the Gospel. Saint Ambrose (*De Sacramentis* Book 3, Chapter 1) saw the foot washing as an "aid to sanctification" for the Apostles to resist the assaults of the Devil and concupiscence so as to lead lives of purity befitting their ministry. Saint Augustine (*Commentary 56 on the Gospel of John 13:6-10*) saw it as a means of purification from contact with earthly things so that hearts may be "turned upwards toward the Lord" and "enabled to dwell in His presence." This same theme of purification of the soul was used by Saint Bernard, Saint Cyprian and Saint Gregory in their interpretation of the foot washing at the Last Supper.¹

Some theologians see imagery of baptism in the washing of the disciples' feet. Other theologians see the washing of the feet as a rite of ordination. The priesthood of Aaron and the Levites in the Old Testament

required them to undergo ritual foot washing before entering the temple for service at the altar (Exodus 30:19-21). In this, we again see Jesus depicted as the new and greater Moses, as Our Lord's washing of the feet His disciples alludes to the Book of Exodus (40:30-32), where Moses washes his brother Aaron, the first high priest, and his sons before they approach the altar. In the Book of Leviticus (8:5-12 and 16:23), Moses washes Aaron and his sons again and vests them, consecrating them as priests. Jesus is following the same sequence, thus providing the basis for the long-standing belief among Catholics that Jesus made the apostles priests that night as surely as Moses ordained Aaron and his sons as directed by God.

Thus, Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later."

Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet."

Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me."

If this were a simple act of hospitality and humble service, it would not have been that hard for Peter to understand. The deeper meaning is that Jesus was replacing the old, Levitical priesthood with a new priesthood, not one handed down from father to son, but by being chosen to share in the priesthood of Christ Himself.

After this homily, I will wash the feet of twelve of our seminarians as a sign of their preparation to share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest. Our liturgy tonight will conclude with carrying the Blessed Sacrament in procession and placing it in the altar of reposition for our adoration of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist.

As the Church keeps watch with our Lord tonight, I encourage you in your prayers to reflect on the extraordinary gift that Jesus gives a priest in his ability to stand in Christ's place and offer the Eucharistic sacrifice for the salvation of souls and to pour out his life for the sake of his spiritual flock through his priestly ministry. In doing so, the priest unites his prayers to those of Our Lord as He offered Himself to the Father as the perfect sacrifice on the Cross.

As we continue the celebration of our Diocese's Year of the Eucharist in conjunction with our National Eucharistic Revival, may God

give us the grace to have an ever-deeper love and devotion to His real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Let us also pray that the Lord will give more men the courage, grace, and strength they need to follow His will in their lives and respond in love to His call for them to become sharers in His Sacred Priesthood.

As we celebrate the institution of the ministerial priesthood and the Holy Eucharist tonight, let us thank God for this great gift, by which we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Resource: Dr. Carol Byrne, *Changing the Meaning of Our Lord's Mandatum*, online at: https://www.traditioninaction.org/HotTopics/f129_Dialogue_48.htm.