

Holy Thursday 2020

Tonight we celebrate with awe and joy the institution by Jesus of the Most Holy Eucharist. This wondrous mystery is the heart of our life of faith, and has been since the Church's beginning. St. Paul tells us he received it from the Lord himself and then handed it on to others. Since then, it has been received, pondered and shared by every succeeding generation. In these days, we receive it in the context of very difficult circumstances created by the COVID-19 virus. So tonight, let us do as Christians have always done: receive and ponder this mystery in our particular setting, allow it to speak to us, and be prepared to hand on to others the assurance, hope and direction it gives.

The heart of the mystery is what we call the doctrine of the Real Presence. Because of the words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper over the bread and wine – “This is my Body; this is my Blood” - the Church does not shy away from speaking with confidence of real change in those elements, by virtue of which she proclaims with joy real presence. It is the Lord. Jesus is truly with us.

We need to hear this. Day after day we listen to heartrending stories of how the coronavirus is separating loved ones from one another. Preventative measures now include the disallowance of visitors to hospitals, nursing homes and care facilities. This is keeping family members apart from one another, sometimes even at critical moments. The pain of this distancing can be excruciating. We want the presence with us of people we love. Sometimes we do have to rely on virtual and remote relating, but we see now – we *feel* now – how these can never substitute for the real presence with us of people we love. Real presence matters.

That's what we have in the Eucharist. St. John tells us that Jesus loved his own to the end, which means that he loved us even to the point of giving his life for us on the Cross. No one loves us more; no one *could* love us more than Jesus does. This is why he celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples. In that act, and precisely out of his infinite love for us, he instituted the Eucharist as the mystery of his abiding Real Presence among us. No preventative health measure – nothing at all, in fact – could ever stand between us and the real presence of the Lord. Even the fact that we cannot gather physically for this mass is no obstacle, since in response to our expressed desire for spiritual communion, Jesus bestows upon us the grace of the sacrament flowing from his Real Presence. For Catholics, there is nothing more consoling than this wondrous mystery. Jesus is with us; we need not ever be afraid.

Now, as we continue to receive and ponder this mystery, the texts from Sacred Scripture help us to see how the Lord is not only assuring us of his Eucharistic presence with us now but also preparing us for the future in which he will continue to accompany us. Let's consider this carefully, since worry about our future is precisely what is growing in our hearts and minds right now.

Of late, predictive models are directing our attention to a future that is anything but certain, especially in this province. These leave us wondering how our circumstances will be different from what we've known and how they will impact our lives. What we hear in the Gospel prepares us for this future by actually reversing our perspective. It invites us to consider not how our situation

will change but how we will change, and how that difference in us can be brought to bear upon new circumstances.

St. John recounts for us the washing of the feet of the disciples by Jesus at the Last Supper. The scene is familiar to us, as is its significance. Jesus assumes the place of a slave, washes their feet, and then tells them he is setting this act as an example for his disciples to follow. From this a fundamental question arises for us: As we look to the future, are we, in fact, ready to turn away from a self-centered mindset to one that is other-centered? Are we ready, as followers of the Lord, to follow his example, humble ourselves, and “wash the feet” of the many people we know will be adversely affected by our medical and financial crisis? Lest we answer this too quickly and without due consideration, let’s ponder the response of Peter. He reacted negatively, and his response might well be reflective of our own.

When Peter saw the Lord Jesus about to wash his feet, he recoiled. “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus was his Lord and Master, and Peter could not square this humble foot-washing with his idea of how Lordship should be exercised. We, too, might object, not, though, to the way Jesus acts but to how he expects us to act. This will certainly be the case if we are in the habit of allowing our own desires to take precedence over the needs of others. To break that habit and truly become people who “wash feet”, we need the grace of Christ to change us. We need to hear Jesus say to us what he said to St. Peter: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” When Christ washes us with his grace, he draws us into communion with himself and his mission, and thus makes us the disciples that he calls us to be.

This brings us back full circle to the Real Presence. At every celebration of the mass, we encounter Jesus Christ, present Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. He is there, in order to wash us with his mercy, grant us communion in his very life, and transform us for mission.

Now, as I said at the beginning, we do not only receive and ponder this mystery; we are also to hand it on to others. As we do, we can draw inspiration from the example of the ancient people of Israel. In the passage from *Exodus*, we heard that their conditions were strikingly similar to our own. They, too, were told to stay home for fear of something dangerous about to pass through the land. This was no virus, however, but God’s avenging angel. They were told to take a protective measure: the spreading on their doorposts of the blood of a lamb. Furthermore, they had to step forth into an unknown future, certain only that God would accompany them. All of this foreshadows the Eucharist, in which we are protected and set free by the blood of Christ, poured out from the Cross and into the chalice of the mass. There, by the gift of himself, Jesus liberates us from slavery to sin, from captivity to our own self-centered concerns, transforms us into disciples ready to “wash feet,” and sends us forth in service. Like the people of old, we are sent by our Lord into a very uncertain future, but we are convinced, because of his Real Presence in the Eucharist, that he will accompany and guide us always. So, having received once again this wondrous mystery, let us in joy and thanksgiving hand it on to others, so that our future, however uncertain, will always be one filled with hope.

✠Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton
09 April 2020

