

HOLY THURSDAY – 2023

With this Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper, we enter again into the Sacred Triduum-- Latin for 'three days'. This is the time of remembering with special solemnity the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ in all the sorrow of his horrific suffering and death and then in all the glory of his rising from the dead. But we can't rejoice in that glory without first remembering his pain and sorrow.

On Palm Sunday we heard St. Paul's words to the Philippians how Jesus 'emptied himself' to the point of death on a cross; we will hear those details again tomorrow in our Good Friday service. But tonight in this Mass we are reminded of other ways that Jesus 'emptied himself' for our sake—ways that are certainly and necessarily connected with his death, but still with a focus and purpose all their own.

First, we hear St. Paul's words to the Corinthians about what Jesus did at that Last Supper in instituting the Eucharist: "...the Lord Jesus...took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you...In the same way also the cup...' This cup is the new covenant in my blood'. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke present the same event in very similar words. There can be no mistaking what Jesus has done here—amazing and incomprehensible as it truly is. He changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood—no mere representation or symbol, but the real thing. His clear words allow for no other interpretation; the Church has taught this amazing Mystery consistently since her beginning, and will do so until the end of time.

The Eucharist is in fact the Real Presence of his Body and Blood, and it is his sacrifice on Calvary made present for us now in this time and in this place and wherever Holy Mass is celebrated. Are we aware of the enormity of this divine gift—that Jesus gives us his very Self in the Eucharist—or have we become so complacent and blasé about it that we forget? Sometimes we may be so full of ourselves and our own supposed 'priorities' that we pretend that staying away from Mass is no big deal because 'I can pray anywhere'...but "Christ Jesus...emptied himself" by offering us his very Body and Blood. How do we respond to that self-emptying on his part for our sake...do we respond?

But Jesus didn't stop there—the gift of his Body and Blood was meant not only for his apostles at the Last Supper, but for everyone of every place and time. Again from our reading tonight: after offering his Body and Blood to those who were with him, he also told them: "Do this in remembrance of me." What Jesus himself did for the first time at the Last Supper, he empowered and commissioned the apostles to do the same. In this, as the Church has always taught, Jesus established the priesthood of the New Covenant—the sacrament of Holy Orders. In doing so, Jesus makes it possible for the Eucharist to be celebrated in every time and place and thus perpetuates his emptying of self so that we can find grace and strength in his Body and Blood. Sometimes we may be so full of ourselves that we think we have to do everything ourselves, that it all depends on us...but "Christ Jesus...emptied himself" by entrusting the Eucharist to his apostles and their successors, the bishops and their helpers, the priests...weak and sinful creatures as they were and as they and we still are.

And Jesus emptied himself even more. We hear in tonight's gospel that Jesus washed the apostles' feet: such a humble, hospitable act! In fact, Peter is at first scandalized by Jesus doing the work of a common slave or servant. But, as always, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing in teaching them an important lesson. If they were to carry on his teaching and ministry, they needed to do so from a sense of loving service for the good of others—not for the sake of power or prestige. Sometimes we may be so full of ourselves that we think we deserve special honor or attention..but "Christ Jesus emptied himself" by saying 'no' to himself so as to be able to say 'yes' to seeing to the dignity and needs of others.

The Church and her leaders have always urged us to join them in following the example of Jesus. That was one of the most important priorities that Archbishop Jackels emphasized during his nearly ten years as our shepherd and that he himself lived out in so many ways. As he prepares to move into retirement and to tend to his own health, let's express our gratitude to him and our prayers for him by following his example of loving service to others and in imitating Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior who "emptied himself...to the point of death, even death on a cross."