

Homily Holy Thursday 2018

Among the more memorable events of my years in the seminary was a visit from St. Theresa of Calcutta in 1976. She had already become a bit celebrated, but it was before her Nobel Peace Prize and the pontificate of ST. John Paul II. One outstanding feature of the visit was its simplicity fitting to her reputation. We were only informed of her visit on the morning of the actual day, with a little 3x5 index card on the rector's bulletin board outside his office. It simply said: "Mother Theresa will be visiting the seminary this afternoon." So later, when the bells were rung, we gathered at the front door to greet her, followed her into the chapel and listened to her brief but poignant message. It was about the Eucharist and our special responsibility for it in our future priesthood.

Mother Theresa's order was known for their practice of a daily hour of prayer to Jesus in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. It was the spiritual foundation of their work among the most disadvantaged, often people otherwise abandoned. Her message was a great reminder of the necessity of the integration of prayer and contemplation with action and social service. There are two particular points of her talk I remember. She spoke about how the work of her sisters became an avenue for bringing the Eucharist to places where it had been prohibited. She had been invited to work in a country where the Islamic faith was predominant and Christian practice restricted. She told the government that her sisters could not come without a priest and the Eucharist. So because of her sister's social outreach for the first time in centuries the Mass was celebrated in the country. Secondly, she united the belief of Jesus, humbly present in the Blessed Sacrament, with the recognition of Jesus in the needy. She said: "How can one claim to see Jesus in the broken bodies of the poor and suffering and not see Him in the broken bread of the Eucharist."

In this evening's celebration which commemorates the Last Supper we note several things. Jesus was celebrating the Jewish Passover, the most profound annual celebration of the covenant between God and His people, with his disciples. In that context Jesus announced that He would give up His Body and shed His Blood in a sacrifice to create a new covenant. And to unite His apostles to that coming event He changed Bread and wine into that, His, Body and Blood, for them to consume. He commanded that His action, the changing of Bread and Wine into His Sacrificial Body and Blood, be done in His memory. Thus, Jesus instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood, so that countless persons, like you and I, could be united to His great sacrifice as we are in every Mass. It is a union that enables us to enjoy all the benefits of His great sacrifice to the Father. He

further noted the humble service associated with the priesthood and the Eucharist by washing the feet of the apostles.

In the Gospel description of Jesus' washing the feet St. Peter resists. When Jesus insists then St. Peter noted His need to be cleansed all over. But overall cleansing was not the purpose of the gesture. The washing of a guest's feet went beyond the practical value of cleaning and soothing of the feet of one who had been walking on a hard and dusty road. It was an expression of hospitality, an expression of honor and personal respect. It was much like the work of St. Theresa's sisters whose practical help always communicated respect for the dignity of the human person, something that many of those they served did not experience from others. The sisters could see, beyond what might appear unpleasant to some, a reflection, a recognition of the presence of the Jesus with whom they had been intimate in prayer earlier in their day.

We cannot read the Gospel without being reminded of the call to serve others. There is much about special service to those in material need. But we also know that all moral living is a gesture of respect and an assist to others in spiritual or emotional ways. Our service must be nurtured by our intimacy with Christ, nurtured by a Eucharistic Faith and practice. Being present and participatory in Mass is bedrock. And I hope that Lenten reflection on the Mass has moved people to increase their efforts for a prepared and full participation in every Mass. I would especially note the special opportunity to speak to the Jesus who humbles Himself to enter us as food, under the appearance of a small piece of bread. One of the changes I introduced when I came here was to take on the task of purifying the sacred vessels after Communion, but still during the Mass, but off to the side at the credence table. At first it seemed people wondered what they are supposed to do with that time. Was the end of Mass simply being delayed a bit? No, not at all. I am pleased the way that time has been supported by our music ministry as a time to relax, reflect, with music that encourages a personal word to Jesus in the Sacrament, a word of thanks, a word of praise.

The other change I made was to have the church building open throughout the day when the office is open. It is encouraging to notice how people, some of them strangers, stop in for a time with Jesus here present in the Sacrament, in the tabernacle at its place of prominence and visibility.

Even apart from the Mass our daily prayer should include words expressed to Jesus in a personal way. Inviting greater attention to His desire to be with us throughout the day.

Tonight we gratefully celebrate that Jesus came and remains among us to serve us especially in the Eucharist . We renew our

pledge to give service to Him in prayer so we can better serve
Him in others in our charity.