

## Holy Thursday -Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper - Lectionary: 39

### Reading I - [Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14](#)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall stand at the head of your calendar; you shall reckon it the first month of the year. Tell the whole community of Israel: On the tenth of this month every one of your families must procure for itself a lamb, one apiece for each household. If a family is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join the nearest household in procuring one and shall share in the lamb in proportion to the number of persons who partake of it. The lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish. You may take it from either the sheep or the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, and then, with the whole assembly of Israel present, it shall be slaughtered during the evening twilight. They shall take some of its blood and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel of every house in which they partake of the lamb. That same night they shall eat its roasted flesh with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

"This is how you are to eat it: with your loins girt, sandals on your feet and your staff in hand, you shall eat like those who are in flight. It is the Passover of the LORD. For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn of the land, both man and beast, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt—I, the LORD! But the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thus, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you.

"This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD, as a perpetual institution."

**Responsorial Psalm - [Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16bc, 17-18](#). R. (cf. 1 Cor 10:16) Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ.**

### Reading II - [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#)

Brothers and sisters: I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

### Gospel - [John 13:1-15](#)

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over. So, during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "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." Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well." Jesus said to him, "Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all." For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean."

So when he had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Many Catholic parishes on Holy Thursday, although optional, choose to do a foot washing ritual. The ritual reflects the ‘servant spirit’ and actions of Jesus during the ‘Last Supper’. Jesus had something more meaningful in mind while Peter was mired in the purely practical reality and wasn’t about to let Jesus serve him in such a demeaning manner. Peter knew from experience that washing feet was a dirty job. It still is, but especially in the time of Christ when people were walking the dusty roads in dry, hot weather, without shoes or socks, just walking around barefoot, maybe wearing some simple sandals. You know from personal experience that when you’re walking around barefoot or with simple sandals, how dirty your feet can get, especially if you’re out in the countryside. Imagine washing your own or the feet of others back then. The poor would do it for each other at home. Mom would do it. The rich, they had slaves and servants to do that for them because it was too dirty a job to do it yourself.

Although Peter didn’t understand what Jesus was attempting to do with him and the others, we celebrate and liturgically memorialize the practical action which he had in mind. Why? Because it aptly symbolizes the kind of servant / sacrificial love that every child of God is called to imitate, a disposition of compassion toward others that they are called to make their own. Jesus serves. He humbled himself, bent low, and served. He calls us to serve even when the task is kind of a dirty job. Think of parents. Everybody had a mom or dad who may not have always wanted to change your diapers and wipe your butt. But they did it. Or when you puked on their shoulder, they managed it. As a college student you might not be able to image doing such a gross act of love, but once you become a parent you are filled with the ability to do difficult and dirty acts of sacrificial love, to serve. You might have to hold your nose, but you do it. Back in the day, like when my family was having kids, there were no disposable diapers that you could fold it up neatly and toss out. You had cloth diapers, and you had to rinse those things in the toilet before washing them by hand or in a machine. Imagine that for a minute. Dirty jobs. Love serves.

Although the general message that all disciples of Christ are called to sacrificial love ought not to be glossed over, it’s important for us to know that on this night that is not what we celebrate primarily. Instead, we are celebrating the institution of the Eucharist and the institution of the Priesthood, the deeper and transformative meaning that Jesus was focused on. The First Reading is a description of the Jewish Passover Meal. It is a sacramental re-enactment of the meal taken by the Israelites before their flight across the Red Sea from Egypt—a flight from slavery to freedom and liberation. It is no coincidence that it was precisely during the celebration of this meal that Jesus instituted what we now call the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This is the link between the Hebrew and Christian Covenants. Jesus transformed the Passover meal into the Eucharistic sacrifice. Thus, in God’s plan, the Passover meal foreshadowed the greater reality: the Catholic mass. In the Second Reading, Paul recalls what Jesus did during that Last Supper—that Passover Meal: These actions were to be repeated by his followers in memory of the liberation brought about for us through his suffering, death and resurrection. Three events are thus united into a new mystery: the Jewish Passover and Paschal Meal; the whole Paschal Mystery of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection; the linking of the bread and wine and its communal eating with the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is a new liberation, from every kind of slavery, especially that of sin and evil. There is now a new Pasch and a new Passover. There is a new Lamb—the Lamb of God. There is a new unleavened bread—the Bread that is the Body of the Risen Lord. The blood of the lamb is now replaced with the Blood of the Lamb, Jesus, who takes away the sin of the world.

As regards the Sacramental Priesthood, Fr. Jerome Neyrey, SJ, longtime professor of New Testament at Notre Dame, [demonstrated](#) that the foot washing scene in John 13 is a “status transformation ritual” in which the disciples are made priests of the new covenant. That’s why the Church gives the instruction that if a parish is going to do the foot washing, it is to be done with 12 men. The foot washing is not only meant to be an example of humble service, but primarily a record of the institution of the Christian priesthood and thus the Scriptural root of the sacrament of holy orders. Interpreting Scripture for its moral import is often the default approach, however always focusing the interpretation for preaching in this way, can leave

deeper meanings unexplored or as the Gospel reading tonight, obscure the truth about the apostles, men who were ordained to serve in a very particular way. They will lead and will continue the redemptive work of Israel's twelve tribes in the world.

The Priesthood and the Eucharist go together like DNA strands, firmly and always united. Without the Priests, you don't get Jesus in the Eucharist. Without the Eucharist, none of us gets Jesus in the most intimate and real of ways, more real than the apostles experienced in those three years with Jesus or on that night when they celebrated the Passover and Jesus gave it new meaning. When those men were made Priests of the new and eternal covenant in Christ, sharing in the priesthood of Christ.

Jesus' reply to Peter, "*What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand*", suggests that more is going on than just a moral example, for the ritual can only be understood "afterward." After his glorification, as is made clear in John 13:1-2, as well as beforehand in John 12:16: "*At first the disciples did not understand these things; but when Jesus had been glorified, then they recalled that it was precisely these things that had been written about him and these things they had done to him.*"

I'd like to focus on the Priesthood. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, "*Lord, do you wash my feet?*" Jesus answered him, "*What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.*" Peter said to him, "*You shall never wash my feet.*"

Jesus' response that Peter can have no "part" in Him unless he submits to the ritual reveals its gravity and indicates that sacerdotal sharing in Christ is involved. Jesus answered him, "**Unless** I wash you, you have no part in me." What did he mean, exactly? We can look directly to various other verses in John's Gospel and see that, he in fact meant that there would be no salvation for Peter if he were to reject Jesus and his invitation at that moment.

**Unless** one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. John 3:3

**Unless** one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. John 3:5

**Unless** you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. John 6:53

**Unless** you believe that 'I AM,' you will die in your sins. John 8:24

**Unless** a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. John 12:24

As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, **unless** it abides in the vine, neither can you, **unless** you abide in me. John 15:4

In John 13 there is evidence that real ontological transformation is the focus of Jesus. We also find parallels to Leviticus 16, which concerns the priestly Day of Atonement ritual: "*Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting, and shall put off the linen garments which he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there; and he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his garments, and come forth, and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people.*" Lev. 16:23-24

Like Peter and all the apostles, every Priest is called forth by God's choice from among the faithful and as it was with the apostles so too is it now that they are to be and do as Christ was and did. To serve sacrificially. Just like parents for their children, so too the priest for the faithful. That means you, in a very real way come first. Priests have given their lives for you. They have answered the call as Christ has asked them to serve where, when, and how He wants and to do so in a way that images, that reflects Christ, in a way that allows you to see Christ.

To live their vocation, priests have been given the grace of more time to pray – if they don't fill that time with everything but prayer; to reflect with scripture so as to be able to break open the word, guided by the Holy

Spirit so that we're not just doing it on the fly or giving the same homily every year for 20 years. There is a real and necessary urgency to their pursuit of holiness so as to model for the faithful the holiness to which we are all called. We're all pilgrims but we do not all have the same responsibilities or obligations. It is right that you should have expectations of your priests and be able to hold them accountable to those expectations, the expectations of Christ for holiness in accord with their vocation. They ought to be and be seen to be men seeking after the heart of the shepherd. To be men who will serve as best they can, as much as they can, while also looking after their relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, taking time to pray, having holy hours, breaking open the word daily, really striving to do all that's possible in cooperation with the graces of our vocation, of the sacrament, and all the sacraments that they receive that are oriented toward realizing that goal to be like Christ to be alter Christus. To be able, with confidence and humility to celebrate the Eucharist, to bring Jesus in Christ's power to you here and now.

It's also important to realize that you don't easily get good priests unless the families of faith they're coming from are also striving for holiness in their state in life. God can, has, and continues to do amazing things with men called from less than ideal life circumstances, but what God wants most is a church seeking the heart of Christ, seeking the holiness to which the members are called, so that the children of the church can readily recognize the voice of their God who loves them and who calls them forth into holiness and in particular states of life so that they too can hear when God says, "be my priest." They must be taught to recognize that voice and receive through the words and actions of their parents who promised to do so at the baptism of their children. To be raised in the faith and the knowledge of God. To be taught about the gifts of the spirit and how they are to be used in their lives. Our children must become men and women who can more readily respond to God calling, like Samuel in the Old Testament. Here I am, Lord. Yes, Lord. Like so many before us, send me. Like Mary who said, I am the handmade of the Lord. To be ready, willing and able to say, your will be done in my life.

It's an incredible gift both to be a priest and to have priests. We all need to pray for them. There are a lot of attacks and temptations both temporal and spiritual. Priests rely on the prayerful support of the people they serve so that what you see in your priest is increasingly a man who will get down on his knees and lovingly serve, doing what Christ did in the best ways possible, in all the ways that he can, that God empowers him to do. Of course, you and I know that Priests are not all as holy as they ought to be. That's certainly evident from the history of the church as well as the recent past. I'm sorry that that's been true and that priests who have not really been after the heart of Christ, have wounded the faithful as well as the witness of the church in the world.

And so, on this day we celebrate both the Priesthood and the Eucharist. The Eucharist that makes it possible for all of us to be transformed into those God calls us to be, to purify our imperfections, to give us new minds, the mind of Christ, to give us hearts of love that serve, each in our own ways, each as we're called in our vocations. This is solemn celebration because we're now entering into in the triduum and solemn in the sense that without the Eucharist and the Priesthood, there's a lot of things that can go wrong in the journey of a Christian. There are 40,000 other groups of Christians out there that can demonstrate that truth. There are Christians within our own walls who make up their own way, who can demonstrate that truth. All of us in this solemn celebration should set our eyes, our hearts, the depths of our being on entering the depths of the truths of our faith, that which we claim to believe.

The Eucharist, this is Christ, truly present, body, blood, soul, and divinity. In this Eucharist, which affects our communion we enter more deeply into the meaning of vocation; of the way in which God calls us to our perfection; the state of life through which we become holy; and to set our eyes on the cross, sacrifice that he made for love for us. There is nothing normal about the life of a follower of Christ, whether lay or clergy. Nothing normal about it. It's extraordinary because of what Jesus did for us and what we've agreed

to receive from him. Faith is a gift. Belief is a choice. And you are here by choice to celebrate these very truths.

It is through the Eucharist and the priesthood that God maintains unity and safety among the sheep of his flock. The institution of the priesthood and the Eucharist are tied to the Last Supper when Jesus commands the apostles. He says, *“Do this in remembrance of me”*. The reason for the priesthood and for the Eucharist is so that the saving work of Jesus Christ is never locked in the past as a mere historical event. Even more, in and through the priesthood and the Eucharist, the entire Body of Christ (the Church) can enter into the offering of the Head. In the Eucharist, we enter most fully into Christ’s death and Resurrection.

#### Key Concepts and Themes for Reflection:

- **Servant Leadership:** The example of Jesus washing the disciples' feet as a symbol of humility and service.
- **Institution of the Eucharist:** The transformation of the Passover meal into the sacrament of Christ's body and blood.
- **Institution of the Priesthood:** The understanding of the foot washing as a "status transformation ritual" ordaining the apostles as priests of the new covenant.
- **The Last Supper:** The pivotal event connecting the Jewish Passover, the institution of the Eucharist and priesthood, and the Paschal Mystery.
- **Paschal Mystery:** The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which brings about liberation from sin.
- **New Covenant:** The agreement established through Jesus Christ, replacing the Old Covenant and offering a new liberation.
- **Sacramental Priesthood:** The specific role of ordained priests in continuing Christ's redemptive work, particularly through the Eucharist.
- **Vocation and Holiness:** The call to all Christians to strive for holiness in their state of life, and the particular responsibilities of priests in modeling and facilitating this.
- **Unity of Eucharist and Priesthood:** The inseparable connection between the Eucharist and the priesthood in the life of the Church.
- **Transformation:** The idea that the Eucharist and the work of priests are meant to transform believers into the image of Christ.

#### Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Eucharist:** The sacrament of Holy Communion, in which Catholics believe that bread and wine are consecrated to become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
- **Priesthood:** In the Catholic Church, the ordained ministry of priests who are consecrated to serve the spiritual needs of the faithful, primarily through the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.
- **Holy Thursday:** The Thursday before Easter, commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus Christ with his apostles, the institution of the Eucharist, and the institution of the priesthood.
- **Last Supper:** The final meal shared by Jesus with his apostles before his crucifixion, during which he instituted the Eucharist.
- **Paschal Mystery:** The central concept of Christian faith relating to the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.
- **Passover:** The Jewish festival commemorating the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Last Supper was a Passover meal.
- **Sacrament:** An outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. The Eucharist and Holy Orders (ordination to the priesthood) are sacraments.
- **Servant Spirit:** An attitude of humility and willingness to serve others, exemplified by Jesus Christ in his actions and teachings.
- **Status Transformation Ritual:** A ceremony or event that signifies a change in a person's role or status within a community. The text argues the foot washing was this for the apostles, making them priests.
- **New Covenant:** The new relationship between God and humanity established through Jesus Christ, superseding the Old Covenant.
- **Ontological Transformation:** A fundamental change in the being or nature of something. The text suggests the Eucharist involves an ontological transformation of the bread and wine.
- **Vocation:** A call from God to a particular state of life or mission. This can include marriage, religious life, or the priesthood, but also the universal call to holiness.
- **Triduum:** The three days preceding Easter Sunday, beginning on the evening of Holy Thursday and concluding with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday. It commemorates the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.