

## Holy Thursday

Today, the daytime hours are an *immediate preparation for the Easter Triduum which begins during the Mass of the Lord's Supper*. Lent is over. And those who have lived in the rhythm of the liturgy have been prepared during the long weeks of prayer and penance to celebrate the Paschal Mystery in deep faith and love. The daytime hours of Holy Thursday complete our spiritual preparation.

### *The Washing of the Feet*

In our monastery, preserving the ancient monastic tradition even of women's monasteries, the superior washes the feet of the community members during a Mandatum ceremony. Then at the evening Mass, the priest washes the feet of 12 men in the sanctuary.

This ancient practice of the washing of the feet gave Holy Thursday the name, "Maundy Thursday". Maundy is a corruption of *mandatum (command)*, referring to the words of Christ: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another."

The washing of the feet is a sign and symbol of servant love, the love Jesus told us to imitate: "If I washed your feet—I who am Teacher and Lord—then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example. As I have done, so also you must do." (John 13:14-15) The whole point of the washing is that the love of Christ for us should prompt our love for one another.

The custom of washing the feet was of Jewish origin, dictated by dusty roads and dirty streets. The early Church which developed outside of Palestine, did not continue this practice. It is recommended for the first time at the Council of Toledo in 694, and after this not again until the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

The practice came into the monasteries which observed it with solemnity from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on. Then it passed over into cathedrals and royal courts. In the reform of 1955 it was inserted for the first time into the Mass of Holy Thursday.

### *Historical Background of Holy Thursday*

Although the celebration of Holy Thursday is very ancient, it did not originally form part of the Triduum. The original Triduum was Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. Together they made one feast, as St. Augustine referred to them. Holy Thursday was seen as a day of preparation, a day for the reconciliation of the penitents, so they could celebrate the Paschal mystery. And the holy chrism was consecrated on that day.

But very early in Church history this day *was* associated with the institution of the Eucharist. Already by the 4<sup>th</sup> century it was called "in coena Domini" - that is, the "Thursday of the Lord's Supper". An even older name in some places is: "Natale Calicis" - the "Birthday of the Chalice."

*"The Lord, having loved those who were his own, loved them to the end. Knowing that the hour had come to leave this world and return to the Father, in the course of a meal he washed their feet and gave them the commandment of love. In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order never to depart from his own and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted the Eucharist as the memorial of his death and resurrection, and commanded his apostles to celebrate it until his return; thereby he constituted them priests of the New Testament." (CCC #1337)*

The custom of the solemn celebration of the Eucharist on the evening of Holy Thursday seems to originate in Jerusalem. St. Augustine himself speaks of celebrating such an evening Mass, at which all, even those who were not fasting, went to Communion.

By celebrating it in the evening we relive the Passover meal Our Lord shared with his disciples on the night when he was betrayed. It marks the final observance of the Pasch of the Old Testament, and the first celebration of the “new and eternal Covenant” in his blood, the blood of the true Passover Lamb.

*“Jesus chose the time of Passover to fulfill what he had announced at Capernaum: giving his disciples his Body and his Blood....By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus’ passing over to his Father by his death and resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfills the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of the kingdom.” (CCC #1339-1340)*

The Church, the Bride of Christ, lingers over these hours, gratefully honoring Our Lord as He leaves us the legacy of His love in the Holy Eucharist.

*“This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after He had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits. This is the faith from which generations of Christians down the ages have lived.” (EE #11)*

*The Paschal Triduum “is gathered up, foreshadowed and concentrated forever in the gift of the Eucharist. In this gift, Jesus Christ entrusted to His Church the perennial making present of the Paschal Mystery. With it, He brought about a mysterious oneness in time between that Triduum and the passage of the centuries. This thought should lead us to profound amazement and gratitude. In the Paschal event and the Eucharist which makes it present throughout the centuries, there is a truly enormous capacity which embraces all of history as the recipient of the grace of the redemption. This amazement should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist.” (EE #5)*

Holy Thursday helps us realize that we receive the living Bread that has come down from heaven, **from a table which is first of all an altar. Like the Israelites of old, we eat the Paschal Lamb.** By eating this food, we are associated in Our Lord’s sacrifice and it becomes our own.

*“The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body.” (CCC #1362)*

Every Mass is the Paschal Mystery, the Lord’s Passover (transitus Domini). We are united with him in his dying in order to be united with him in his resurrection. This is why in this Mass, emphasis is placed on the cross: “Let us glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...” Our recalling of him is the recalling of One whose life was poured out in a supreme gesture of love.

*“In the sense of Sacred Scripture the memorial is not merely the recollection of past events but the proclamation of the mighty works wrought by God for men. In the liturgical celebration of these events, they become in a certain way present and real. This is how Israel understands its liberation from Egypt: every time Passover is celebrated, the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that*

*they may conform their lives to them. In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present. 'As often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out.' Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice....The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its memorial and because it applies its fruit....The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice." (CCC #1362–1367)*

***The Gospel introduces not just a foot washing, but the very work of redemption which is symbolized by the foot washing.*** Christ cleanses us of sin, and if he does not wash us through his Passion, we can have no part with him. (cf Titus 2:14 and I Pet 1:18-20)

Holy Thursday's great lesson is this: the fruit of the Eucharist is union with our neighbor.

### ***Procession and Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament***

Until after the year 1000, there was no worship of the reserved Sacrament nor any special symbolism attached to the transfer of the Holy Eucharist away from the altar. During the Middle Ages this transfer took on much importance and was conducted with an elaborate ritual. The Churches of Spain and France, under influence of the Church in Jerusalem, began the practice of the nocturnal vigil in honor of the Passion of Our Lord.

In Jerusalem the faithful could visit the places where the events of the Passion took place. In the West this was impossible, so they centered this nocturnal vigil around the reserved Blessed Sacrament instead. In true medieval fashion they imitated certain details of the Passion, so that St. Paul of the Cross will refer to the place of reservation as the "holy sepulchre," the customary name in use in his time. The sacred Species was wrapped in what they called "the linen shroud" and so on.

Receiving Holy Communion on Good Friday became increasingly rare, and so only one large host was reserved for the celebrant, and this was placed in a chalice covered with a silken cloth.

The procession with lights and incense at the end of the Holy Thursday Mass began in France in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the late Middle Ages, the adornments proper to Corpus Christi became attached to Holy Thursday, and this is when the singing of the Pange Lingua came in during the procession. Also elaborate floral arrangements around the tabernacle became the rule. These practices, praiseworthy in themselves, tended to distract attention from Holy Week to what was secondary.

In the reformed rite, the solemn transfer of the Blessed Sacrament has been retained, and there is no question of returning to the austerity of the early Roman ordos. The Pange Lingua is retained, and it provides a commentary on the rite itself. The adoration is to be prolonged at least until midnight.

In our monastic practice, at midnight the flowers are removed and the candles extinguished, although our Sisters continue the adoration two by two until the hour of the community's private prayer in early morning. In early morning, the altar itself is dismantled, and the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a more discreet place.