

Holy Thursday - April 1, 2021
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Memory is an important part of what makes us human. We understand much more about who we are by looking back on our past. This past year will forever be remembered for how we endured the longest Lenten isolation of our lives. Perhaps, we will also recall how our common affliction evoked the “best” from us, as we sought to keep in touch — without touching — and to care even for strangers whose need was greater than our own.

For our Jewish brothers and sisters, memory is an important part of their religious faith. Many of the Commandments in the Hebrew Sacred Scripture begin with the word: “remember”. “Remember, keep holy the Sabbath.” Through priests, prophets and kings, God called His Chosen People to remember the mighty deeds He performed to save them.

In our Exodus reading, God directs the Israelites to remember how He freed them from slavery in Egypt. Each year, they were to slaughter a lamb, sprinkle its blood on their doorposts, and eat its roasted flesh, with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. The blood would remind them of how the firstborn of every Egyptian family was struck down, while their own children were spared. The bitter herbs symbolized the bitterness of their slavery, and the unleavened bread — a sign of how they fled in haste, without time for proper baking.

Today, their Passover observance still reminds participating Jews of how their ancestors were freed from slavery and spared from untimely death. Their Passover is more than a reenactment of history; it is a participation in a saving reality!

Interestingly, though the word “remember” occurs frequently in the Hebrew Sacred Scripture, we only hear it used once by Jesus, and that happens during the Last Supper. It is not his miracles or parables that He asks His disciples to remember. Rather, it is the gift of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist that He desires to leave as an everlasting legacy for us. When Jesus says to His disciples “Do this in remembrance of Me,” He is not asking them to reenact the “Last Supper” as we might reenact a play. No! He desires His Body and Blood to be the spiritual food that nourishes and sustains us today!

What we celebrate here in Eucharist is not just a commemoration of what Jesus did. It is the real thing! Whenever we celebrate Mass, we place ourselves virtually in the upper room, at the Last supper, and at the foot of the cross. (It is better than Zoom!) It is what St. Paul clearly wrote to the church in Corinth and to this community in Brown Deer: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes.”

One of the most powerful and moving Negro spirituals is a favorite of mine: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” In beautiful simplicity, the song asks if we were there and invites us to “tremble” at the thought of our Savior’s death, and resurrection. We were not physically there in the upper room, at the Last Supper, in the Garden of Olives, at the foot of the cross, or at the empty tomb. But, every celebration of Eucharist brings us “there” — through the power of memory and the mystery of faith! Christ comes to us in the form of bread and wine, just as surely as He was present to the disciples. Mystically, we receive the same body that hung on the cross, the same blood poured out for our salvation.

Our sins are forgiven and we are sent forth to gratefully do for others what Christ has done for us — to serve others in need!

The memory of it all should cause us to tremble in awe and thanksgiving! God bless you.