

HOLY THURSDAY / YEAR A13 APR 2017

Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-15

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At one part in the celebration of the Jewish Seder meal, which commemorates the Jewish Passover, traditionally, the youngest child at the table asks the intriguing question, “*Why is this night different from all other nights?*”

The child continues, in what is called “The Four Questions,” contrasting what is taking place that night in how the meal is conducted, while giving examples of what customarily takes place other nights. And that questioning leads into more of the reading of the *Haggadah*, which gives the order of the Seder meal, and commemorates the story of the Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt, as recounted in the Book of Exodus.

We might ask the same question about this night for Catholic Christians – “*Why is Holy Thursday a night different from all other nights?*”

In the liturgical book called the *Ceremonial of Bishops* – referring to the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper – it says, “This Mass is, first of all, the memorial of the institution of the eucharist, that is of the memorial of the Lord’s Passover, by which under sacramental signs he perpetuated among us the sacrifice of the New Law.”

And, in celebrating the Lord’s Supper, Jesus created the priesthood in which the priest acts *in persona Christi* – in the Person of Christ – in order to consecrate the gifts of bread and wine that are brought forth by the faithful. And through the words of consecration – and by the power of the Holy Spirit – what we see with our eyes as merely bread and wine have truly become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, which we see with the eyes of faith.

As Catholic Christians – though shackled with the limits of our humanity to understand all things – that sacred occurrence is reality.

Holy Week brings into focus, like no other time can, the reality of what God has done for us. While Christmas takes us to the crèche – to the Infant Son of God, become man – to that initial step on the road to our salvation, it is Holy Week that brings us face to face with the reality of what it all means that Christ took on our humanity. And in Holy Week, through the assurances and knowledge of our faith, we figuratively nod in understanding, in the depths of our heart, as we move from the events of the Last Supper, to the Cross, and finally to the tomb, because we know what is going to take place.

*We know...* but what difference in our lives has that knowledge made? What difference is evident because we are Catholic Christians who live the Holy Week experience every year – and in fact, at every celebration of the Eucharist?

All that took place in that first Holy Week is of unique relevance to us today. Every detail about the life of Christ is part and parcel of the lives we live, and the faith we profess. None of it is irrelevant. It all has meaning in who we are today...what we do...what we avoid doing...what we are called by Christ to do.

And so we come to this week called “Holy.” We come to those most holy days, beginning with today, Holy Thursday. Today – recalling the example of Christ as the Servant of all, washing the feet of His disciples, as Fr. Kevin will do here shortly . . . Today – the celebration of the Last Supper, when the institution of both sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood took place – Christ’s incomparable gift of His Body and Blood given to us, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our God is a God of love. Nothing else works to explain what we commemorate during the Sacred Triduum of Holy Week each year – Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil on Saturday night – or for that matter, at every gathering when we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Nothing explains it – *only God’s love*.

Even the words of Sacred Scripture – in the sense of our humanity, and our inability to comprehend the Divine – cannot always take us to where we long to be in our understanding of what God has willed for us, and what Christ has done for us. Faith is necessary to help us understand God’s love beyond the loftiness of words and theology.

In the final book of his trilogy on the life of Christ, titled *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, Pope Benedict XVI, wrote, in part, about our experiences in trying to understand our faith, through the example of the encounters of others with Christ in the Scriptures, like the woman at the well. And it’s there we come to Pope Benedict’s beautiful understanding of what is actually taking place in our efforts to understand, and his words are applicable to us in this Holy Week – and with special relevance, perhaps, on Holy Thursday.

He says, “Again and again, Jesus’ words exceed our rational powers. Again and again, they surpass our capacity to understand. The temptation to reduce them, to bend them to our own criteria, is understandable. Yet good exegesis [which is the interpretation of sacred scripture] requires of us the humility to leave intact this loftiness that so often overtakes us, not to reduce Jesus’ sayings by asking to what extent we can take him at his word. He takes us completely at our word.” The pope says, “Believing means submitting to this loftiness and slowly growing into it.”

An example of this is when Jesus says the words that are the institution narrative of the Eucharist: “Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body...” And then, “Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood...” And finally, the command, “Do this in memory of me.”

We need to take Christ at his word. It truly is the inestimable gift of Christ that we Catholics receive in the Eucharist. But before we Catholics come forward to receive Christ in the Eucharist – in everything that is prayed by the priest, and by us – let us focus on those words and let them enter into our hearts, and into our consciousness like never before to create a new awareness of that which is foundational to our faith. And our faith is that the Eucharist is Jesus Christ!

In our journey of faith this Holy Week – and truly every week, and every day – may we more clearly understand the words of Christ in Holy Scripture -- *as they are* – believing all that He says, so that we may grow more fully into the life they make possible for us – a life in Christ . . . eternal life with our Triune God. And, may we truly understand the answer to the question patterned after that first posed in the Seder meal, but now asked of each one of us, in relation to this most solemn feast of Holy Thursday, the Mass of the Lord’s Supper . . .

*“Why is this night different from all other nights?”*

