

04/06/2023 Holy Thursday

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

Today we remember how Jesus transformed the Jewish Passover into the New Testament Passover. The Jewish Passover was, in fact, a joint celebration of two ancient thanksgiving celebrations. The descendants of Abel, who were shepherds, used to lead their sheep from the winter pastures to the summer pastures after the sacrificial offering of a lamb to God. They called this celebration the "Pass over." The descendants of Cain, who were farmers, held a harvest festival called the Massoth in which they offered unleavened bread to God as an act of thanksgiving. The Passover feast of the Israelites (Exodus 12:26-37) was a harmonious combination of these two ancient feasts of thanksgiving, commanded by the Lord God and celebrated yearly by all Israelites to thank God for His miraculous liberation of their ancestors from Egyptian slavery, their exodus from Egypt, and their final arrival in the Promised Land.

Today's Gospel describes how Jesus transformed the Jewish Passover into the Eucharistic celebration. First, he washed His Apostles' feet – a tender reminder of his undying affection for them. Then he commanded them to do the same for each other. The incident reminds us that our vocation is to take care of one another as Jesus always takes care of us. Finally, Jesus gave his apostles his own Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine as Food and Drink for their souls, so that, as long as they lived, they'd never be without the comfort and strength of his presence. Thus, Jesus washed their feet, fed them, and then went out to die for us all. This Gospel episode challenges us to become, for others, Christ the healer, Christ the compassionate and selfless brother, Christ the humble "washer of feet."

That night in the upper room Jesus knew what it would take to change the world — not strife and revolution, not warfare and bloodshed, but love, sincere, self-sacrificing love on the part of his people. That's why He takes bread and wine and gives us Himself in Holy Communion, to bring us forgiveness and to strengthen us to love one another. "This is My will — this is My commandment for you — love one another" (Jn 13:34).

Thus, on Holy Thursday, we celebrate three anniversaries: 1) the anniversary of the first Holy Mass, 2) the anniversary of the institution of ministerial priesthood in order to perpetuate the Holy Mass, convey God's forgiveness to repentant sinners, and preach the Good News of salvation, 3) the anniversary of Jesus' promulgation of his new commandment of love: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34).

The Stole and the Towel is the title of a book, which sums up the message of the Italian bishop, Tony Bello, who died of cancer at the age of 58. On Maundy Thursday of 1993, while on his deathbed, he wrote a pastoral letter to the priests of his diocese. He called upon them to be bound by "the stole and the towel." The stole symbolizes union with Christ in the Eucharist, and the towel symbolizes union with humanity by service. The priest is called upon to be united with the Lord in the Eucharist and with the people as their servant. So, today we celebrate the institution of both the Eucharist and the priesthood: the feast of "the stole and the towel," the feast of love and service. **So, today you can call your own pastor, priests from your family or priests whom you know, wish them Happy Priest Day and say how much you appreciate them for all their sacrifices and services to the people of God.**

Both the feast of Eucharist and the priesthood challenge us for humble service. **1)** Our celebration of the Eucharist requires that we wash one another's feet, i.e., serve one another, and revere Christ's presence in other persons. In practical terms, that means we are to consider their needs to be as important as our own and to serve their needs, without expecting any reward. **2)** A loving invitation for sacrificial sharing and self-giving love. Let us imitate the self-giving model of Jesus who shares with us his own Body and Blood and who enriches us with his real presence in the Holy Eucharist. It is by sharing our blessings – our talents, time, health and wealth – with others that we become true disciples of Christ." **3)** And at the end of the Mass "Go forth, the Mass is ended," really means, "Go in peace to love and serve one another." Today let us pray that you, the faithful followers of Christ and we, the priests are to carry Jesus to our homes and places of work, conveying to others around us the love, mercy, forgiveness, and the spirit of humble service of Christ whom we carry with us. **Amen.**