April 14, 2022—Holy Thursday—The Mass of the Lord’s Supper

The roads were dusty, and they wore sandals at the time of Jesus, so it was courteous to wash the feet of a guest when they arrived at your house for dinner. This was the work of a slave, not the master of the house. At the Last Supper, Jesus took off His outer garment, knelt and washed the feet of the apostles. He explained: “**I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do**.” He showed them that humble service was not beneath Him, who was rightly called teacher and master.

This act of humility was only a foreshadowing of what would begin later that night with the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. As St. Paul wrote to the Philippians: “**Christ Jesus . . . emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross**” (2:7-8). Crucifixion was the most humiliating death imaginable!

Jesus knew that He was going to leave His apostles through His death and resurrection and ultimately His ascension into heaven. He promised not to leave them orphans, so how could He remain with His Church that would eventually spread to every people and nation in the world? He knew that His Church would constantly need to go to the grace and mercy of His death on the Cross to strengthen her and sustain her amidst all the trials of life. So how could He ensure this would be possible? He would accomplish it through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which would renew the one sacrifice of Calvary on the altar of every Church in the world. At the same time, His real Presence in the Holy Eucharist would be constantly near and present to His people in every Tabernacle and every Holy Communion they received.

The pattern for this already existed in the Old Testament. The Last Supper took place in the context of the Passover. We heard about its establishment in the First Reading. Moses told each household to take a year old, male lamb and sacrifice it and then roast it for this most special meal. This was to be a perpetual memorial for the Jewish people to commemorate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. For the Jews, the Passover was, and still is, a memorial, in the deepest sense of the word. It wasn’t just a memory device, but actually renewed and reenacted the original event. Each time they eat the Passover meal with its ritual responses, they are back with their ancient ancestors at the time of Moses experiencing the events that freed them from slavery, bringing its meaning to the present.

After the apostles reflected upon the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus, they could easily understand God’s plan for the Holy Mass to re-present those great events of the New Covenant. In what is probably the earliest written account of the Last Supper, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians the words of consecration from the Last Supper and told them its meaning, “**For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes**.” Every time we participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar, we are taken back to the original event of the crucifixion with the Virgin Mary and St. John. The graces won 2000 years ago by Jesus on the Cross are made present to us in this Blessed Sacrament in the present moment.

On this night, Jesus established the new covenant and with it a new priesthood. He ordained the apostles with the words “**Do this in memory of me**.” The ministerial priesthood is a sacrament of service to the rest of the faithful to bring them the word and sacraments of Jesus. Each priest of the Catholic Church acts “in the Person of Jesus Christ” because we are the voice and hands of Jesus to administer the sacraments. It is Jesus who baptizes and Jesus who absolves and Jesus who renews His own sacrifice in the Holy Mass through the ministry of His priests.