

Homily: Institution of Eucharist and Priesthood

Msgr. Robert Dempsey on April 1, 2021

For many years after the Civil War, an Illinois farmer used to visit a soldier's grave in Nashville, clearing the weeds and planting flowers around it. Once a visitor saw him carefully tending the tombstone and asked: "Is that your boy?" "No," the man said, "he was just a boy who lived in our town." "Well, why do you tend his grave?" The man said, "You see, years ago, when the war just started, I had seven small children and my wife was sick. I was drafted into the army, and there was nobody to care for the farm. The children probably would have starved without me. I was terribly worried about it, but the very day that I was supposed to report for the draft, a neighbor boy came and offered to go to war in my place. He said that he had no family that was depending on him, so better he should go than me. He died during the war and was buried here." Then the man pointed to an inscription that he himself had chiseled into the gravestone: "He died for me."¹ Each of us today can say the same thing about Our Lord: he died on the cross for me.

But have you ever wondered: What would it be like to have been there at the foot of the cross, to have seen Jesus holding out his arms to us and looking at us with such love in his eyes? If only we could have been there!

Our Lord knows that we could not have been there with him, so he decided to be here with us instead. We were not with him as he hung on the cross, but he wanted that perpetual offering of himself to be always present among us. On this very altar, under the appearance of bread and wine, Christ our Lord makes present for us the one, eternal sacrifice he offers for our sake at the right hand of his Father in heaven. Films such as *Jesus of Nazareth* or *The Passion of the Christ* vividly portray the Lord's sacrifice on Calvary. But they're *just* movies: actors and sets, costumes and celluloid.

On the other hand, the celebration of the Eucharist is not a dramatic staging of Christ's Passover. Rather, it is the *one and the same* sacrifice of the cross, which is *re-presented* whenever Mass is celebrated, until the end of time. While the liturgy of the Mass is far less vivid and emotional than a Hollywood movie, what takes place here *is truly and really the eternal offering of Christ*. In a film you're looking at images; here you have Jesus really and substantially present, endlessly offering

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himself to God the Father on our behalf. Which is why St. Paul says: “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” in glory.² You don’t have to search high and low for God; here he is, before our eyes, hidden under the appearances of bread and wine: food for our souls, food for our lives.

But if Christ is present, who is responsible for making him present? How does this Mystical Supper come about, in which heaven and earth are united and we foretaste the banquet of eternal glory? Well, the Lord thinks of everything, doesn’t he? The night before he died, when he first revealed the mystery of the Holy Eucharist to his apostles, he commanded and empowered them to “do this in memory of me.”³ It was to the apostles of his Church that he entrusted this awesome mystery. So when the successors of the apostles, or the priests who are their coworkers, celebrate the Holy Eucharist, Christ himself is truly in our midst, and the bread and wine *you* offer at the altar are really transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

So close is Christ’s identification with his priests that during the consecration they don’t say “this is Christ’s Body, this is Christ’s blood,” but rather “this is *my* Body, this is *my* Blood,” because it is really the Lord himself who is speaking in them and working through them. This fact demands that priests be holy and faithful. Dear friends, pray constantly that your priests will always live lives worthy of the calling they have received for your spiritual benefit.

Lastly, tonight’s celebration gives practical expression to the old adage, “you are what you eat.” Wheaties[®] may be the “breakfast of champions,” but Holy Communion is the supper of Christ’s athletes. It is Christ who gives us a vivid example of what this involves. The Gospel says that “he loved his own in the world and [that] he loved them to the end.”⁴ Before giving them the Eucharist and empowering them to celebrate it in his memory, he gave them an object lesson in just what that love means. He performed for them one of the most menial tasks of all, a task that in his era was reserved to slaves: he washed their feet.

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That action, however, was a mere token of what would follow, for the next day he sacrificed not merely his dignity but his very life, and greater love than this no man has than to lay down his life for his friends.⁵ The Lord himself explains what this washing of feet means: “If I, ... the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.”⁶ We are what we eat. If we eat the Body and Blood of him who is Love incarnate, we must incarnate that love in everything we do.

Dear friends, there are three things we celebrate this evening: 1) the institution of the Eucharist, that is, the memorial of the Lord’s Passover, by which the sacrifice of the new law is perpetuated under sacramental signs; 2) the institution of the priesthood, by which Christ’s mission and sacrifice are continued in the world; and 3) the love with which the Lord loved us unto the end and which he commanded us to show one another.⁷ All of this is summed up and made present in the Eucharist we celebrate.

O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine!

¹Story taken from a homily by Rev. Raymond V. Cleaveland, April 1, 2007.

²Cf. 1 Cor 11:26.

³Roman Missal; cf. Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24.

⁴Jn 13:1.

⁵Cf. Jn 15:13.

⁶Jn 13:14-15.

⁷Cf. Cæremoniale Episcoporum, 297.