

Pray for Your Priests

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien's Holy Thursday homily, given at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Homeland, follows.

With this Mass we enter into the Sacred Triduum: Eucharist, Death, Resurrection. With this Mass we begin the Lord's Passion, constituting the tragic and concluding moment - long prepared and awaited - of the earthly existence of the Word of God. With this Mass we joyfully and thankfully celebrate the institution of two of our sacraments, most profound, "This is my Body, this is my Blood," Christ's gift of the Eucharist to his Church. And to the Apostles: "Do this in remembrance of me," Christ's gift to his Church and to the world - the sacred priesthood.

Surely the death and resurrection of Jesus is the turning point, the foundation of our Faith - for us, the singular most important event in history. That first Holy Thursday meal was gathered up, foreshadowed and "concentrated" forever in that gift of the Eucharist. So decisive was the death and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of the human race, "That Jesus offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there" in the Holy City.

Throughout my priestly life, I have relished this Mass of the Lord's Supper because of my love for Jesus and for the Priesthood. I relish this celebration no less tonight, but never before have I had to offer it when faced almost daily with the horrendous and appalling headlines pouring out from all over Europe the last several weeks. Many innocent lives have been ravaged, devastated for the length of their lifetime - the result of the sinful and indeed criminal acts of a small percentage of selfish men. Their victims hold a special claim on our prayers and it is just that those responsible for such crimes should pay the penalty.

Sadly, so many others are being forced to pay for those sins. The revered and illustrious history of the priesthood has been tarnished, the lofty vocation of the priestly call has been profaned and the committed lives of today's thousands upon thousands of dedicated and self-sacrificing priests have been called into question. While the need for appropriate accountability is understandable, the rush to condemn has been swift and, in some cases, unfair and reckless. The op-ed columns

of our nation's so-called "newspaper of record" have been filled almost daily with vicious and vile attacks on our Holy Father during this, the most holy time of our liturgical year. Both the timing and irresponsible nature of such shoddy "journalism" calls into question the veracity, if not the motives, of such diatribes, and of those who have penned them.

How important it is for us, this night, to recall that interwoven with the grandeur of the original Last Supper, was the cross, innocent suffering, injustice, evil and deadly betrayal. However, none of this detracted from the wonder and mystery of the Lord's words and actions then, nor should it now.

Then, as now, he asked sinful men to lend him heart, voice and hands that he could perform his ministry through their - through his - priesthood, well aware as he was of their denials and betrayals, their sins and their sinfulness.

Let nothing distract us this night from the Lord's glorious body and blood, excelling all price, as we will sing during our Eucharistic procession tonight. In the Eucharist we will see a true "glimpse of heaven appearing on earth ... a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey."

And as we thank the Lord for the gift of the priesthood, please pray that your priests will, above all, be men of the Eucharist: there can be no Church without the Eucharist, and there can be no Eucharist without the priesthood. May the holy lives of your priests echo Paul's claim to the Corinthians: "We do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake."

Priests - "Your slaves for Jesus' sake ... He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. ... He rose from supper, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet."

By the Lord's words and actions that night, the double mandate, or mandatum, has been bound together for all time:

The bread and wine ... "Do this in memory of me."

The towel and basin ... "As I have done for you, you should also do."

A challenge to successive generations of every priest and, indeed, every disciple: to prayer and action, Eucharist and service.