

Some Thoughts for Holy Thursday

But for the eagerly anticipated Easter Vigil, there is no richer celebration in our Church's liturgical treasury than this Liturgy of the Lord's Supper.

Some days ago, I treated myself to a day of prayer centered on the sacrifice of the Mass and the Holy Eucharist. In particular, I have over the years been struck by the profundity of recent papal meditations on this Mystery of Faith. This Holy Thursday I would like to offer you, without scholarly references, a sample of the sublimity of those meditations in the hope and prayer that this Lord's Supper and every Mass in your future will draw you more deeply into this greatest mystery of all mysteries of God's love.

In a much overlooked letter to all the bishops of the world, Pope John Paul II noted that, "Beginning with the Upper Room and Holy Thursday, the celebration of the Eucharist has a long history, a history as long as that of the Church ... in the course of this history ... there has been no change in 'mysteries' instituted by the Redeemer of the World at the Last Supper ... for the Holy Thursday supper was a sacred rite, a primary and constitutive liturgy, through which Christ, by pledging to give His life for us, Himself celebrated sacramentally the mystery of His passion and resurrection, the heart of every Mass ... the sacred character of the Mass is a sacredness instituted by Christ. The words and actions of every priest, answered by the conscious active participation of the whole Eucharistic assembly, echo the words and actions of Holy Thursday."

This is a most radical declaration - that every Mass since the Last Supper, wherever and whenever celebrated, is dependent upon and in some way rooted and participative in the Last Supper of Jesus two millennia ago.

The very foundation of the Church is "closely bound up with the mystery of Holy Thursday," as the twelve who constituted the first Church at the Last Supper, shared in the body and blood of the Lord. To appreciate this, it would help to cut to the very heart of Catholic worship called liturgy.

And what is the place of this liturgical act of the Lord's Supper in relation to the

sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ? Therefore, “At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the Paschal Triduum: To the events of the evening of Holy Thursday, to the Last Supper and to what followed it. The institution of the Eucharist sacramentally anticipated the events which were about to take place, beginning with the agony in the garden.” Christ’s sacrifice “is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that [he] 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.”

The possibility of this literal one-ness of our Eucharistic sacrifice with that first Holy Thursday and the days that followed is concisely explained by Cardinal Henry Newman: “And He is still with us, for all that He is in Heaven, so again is the hour of His cross and passion ever mystically present, though it be past these eighteen hundred years. Time and space have no portion in the spiritual kingdom which He has founded; and the rites of His Church are mysterious spells by which he annuls them to both.”

Or, in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “ ... all that Christ is - all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity and so transcends all times.”

We could go on quoting a host of resources but these few references might prompt some to study, even in small groups, the ever-developing theology of the Eucharist as offered in recent Church documents. And inseparable from the timeless mystery of the Mass is, of course, the role of the priest who, by ordination becomes one “in the person of Christ, the head of the Church.” This, to such an extent that in the words of Consecration at Mass, “the priest says these words, or rather puts his voice at the disposal of the One who spoke these words in the Upper Room and who desires that they should be repeated in every generation by all those who in the Church ministerially share in his priesthood.”

And in case anyone would like to delve deeper, all the above is taken from three papal encyclicals—a little steep for some but containing real riches for all:

John Paul II, Dominicae Cenaе (The Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist) 1980

John Paul II, Ecclesia de Eucharistia (The Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church) 2003

Benedict XVI, Sacramentum Caritatis (The Sacrament of Love) 2007

A blessed Easter to all and may the risen, Eucharistic Christ shine in your hearts that you, in turn, might make known the glory of God shining in the face of Christ.”
(2 Cor. 4_6)