

The gift of the Eucharist sends us forth in service and charity

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It was the evening of Passover, and there were many Passover suppers celebrated in Jerusalem that night. But one of those suppers was different. It took place in an ordinary upper room, in an ordinary house, and was attended by common, ordinary men. But what happened there was uncommon, and certainly not ordinary. Jesus was present in that upper room, and he would do something remarkable, he would give the Church something extraordinary and new.

In the Incarnation, the Son of God took our human nature to himself. He took our flesh and blood so that he might be forever one with humanity, so that he might be one of us. But now, in this upper room, the Son of God would give that flesh and blood to his apostles, so that he could be even more perfectly one with his people.

Jesus knew what was coming, he knew about the betrayal, the suffering, and the cross that awaited him. He knew that his body would be broken and his blood would be poured out to pay the price for our sins, the price of our redemption. But before he would mount that cross, Jesus had a gift to give. In the upper room Jesus carried out sacramentally what on the next day he would accomplish on the hill of Calvary: the total offering of himself - of his body and blood - given to the Father as a sacrificial lamb.

This gift is, of course, the Eucharist, and we are invited to partake of it. “Take this all of you, and eat, for this is my body.... Take and drink, this is my blood...” With these words, Jesus commands and invites all of his disciples of all times and places to participate and partake of his sacrifice. Just as the Israelites partook of the Passover lamb and were saved by the lamb’s blood smeared on their doorposts, so we partake in the new Passover lamb and are saved eternally by his blood.

The whole mystery of Christ’s sacrifice, from the suffering of the cross to the Resurrection, is contained in this gift of the Eucharist. And it is given to us, given as a pledge of our closeness to Jesus. Pope St. Pius X tells us that “this side of heaven, there is no way to be closer to Jesus than by worthily receiving him in Holy Communion.” And Blessed John Paul II, who will be canonized a saint next week, tells us that “the Church draws her life from the Eucharist.”

Just as on the cross life was restored to our fallen humanity, so the Eucharist becomes our food to sustain the gift of that life. It is a mystery that leaves us amazed, and in his encyclical letter on the Eucharist, John Paul II says “this amazement should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist.” How can we not feel amazement at such a gift of selfless love? How can we not be filled with awe at this profound mystery?

To the apostles gathered in that upper room, Jesus also gives another commandment: “Do this in remembrance of me.” With these words, our Lord creates these apostles - these simple fishermen - as his priests of the New Covenant. He commands them to continue what he has begun, that they and their successors would make present to the end of days this same saving sacrifice, this holy banquet. Without this priesthood, without these men linked directly to that event in the upper room, the Eucharist would not be, and the Church could not be the Church that Jesus established. Blessed John Paul tells us once again, “The priesthood was born in the upper room together with the Eucharist.” And so, meditating on the events of this upper room, we thank God too for this gift to his Church.

But Jesus gives one more command in that upper room to his apostles. During the supper, Jesus interrupted the usual course of the Passover meal, and taking the role of a servant, with a basin and towel he washed the feet of his disciples. What an extraordinary sight it must have been. Here is the Lord of the Universe carrying out the humblest of duties that was usually done by a house servant. And to the Apostles whose feet he has washed, Jesus says, “As I have done for you, you should also do.”

If our celebration of the Eucharist truly draws us into communion with Jesus and allows us to share in the fullness of his life, then it must send us forth to our brothers and sisters in service and charity. The fruit of the Eucharist must always be love, love given in response to love received. If out of love, Jesus takes on the role of a servant, then how can we be anything other than servants to one another? In our communion with Christ, we learn the meaning of selfless love and service. And we hear our Lord say to us, “As I have done for you, you should also do.”

This simple upper room is so ordinary, but it is the scene of so much grace and such profound mystery. It is the place where the Eucharist is given, where the priesthood is instituted, and where all are called to loving service. This upper room is a place that changes all of us, that summons all of us to walk with Christ in his work of redemption. The Church invites us tonight to attend closely to the events of the upper room and to contemplate the face of Jesus who loved us to the end.