

“Continue what I have begun. Share this great gift.”

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April 2, 2015

*Holy Thursday
Cathedral of St. Mary
Fargo, ND*

“He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.” This evening we enter into the Sacred Triduum, the sacred three days in which the whole mystery of our redemption is played out. As John tells us, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. And as he prepared for this passage, he showed the depth of his love for his followers, indeed for all people of all times. Tonight the Church remembers the Lord’s Supper, that Passover supper that brought Jesus and his disciples together in the Upper Room. We often refer to this as the Last Supper, but the idea of being the last gathering implies that something was coming to an end. But in fact, this was only the beginning, the beginning of an event that would change all of us forever.

When a person knows he will die, he puts his affairs in order. He leaves last instructions, he leaves a last will and testament, he makes sure that his loved ones are provided for. Jesus was well aware that he would die, and that he would die in material poverty. He had no earthly treasure to leave behind. But he took pains to bequeath to his loved ones the one treasure he did have. He gave himself. In this so-called Last Supper, Jesus placed before his followers a sacrificial banquet greater than the Passover supper with the blood of a lamb. In this banquet, he gave the sacrifice of his own Body and Blood. He knew that the very next day, he would willingly give his life for those he loved. Again, “he loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.”

But he didn’t want that love, that gift to be just a memory. So he gave to his followers, to his Church, the sacrament of the Eucharist, the sacrament that perpetuates his gift of his own life and makes it present to us always. This is his last bequest. He makes it possible for people of every age to encounter him, to touch him, to receive him. Jesus promised his followers, “I will be with you always, even until the end of the age.” And the Eucharist fulfills that promise.

We call this the Last Supper, but this is not the end of anything. It is the beginning for the Church, the beginning of our perpetual communion in the sacrifice of Christ. It is the beginning of our sharing in his Body and Blood, it is the beginning of the great gift of the Eucharist that would sustain and nourish believers down through the ages. In the early days of the Church, during times of persecution, Christians went to their death for receiving it. Great cathedrals and basilicas were built to house it, to honor it. Priests in the 16th century were hung for remaining faithful to it and celebrating it for the people. And even today, in the Middle East, our brothers and sisters in faith are exiled and killed for it. Tonight we receive this Eucharist again, the last bequest of Jesus, a gift of supreme, abiding love.

In this Last Supper, Jesus not only gives the Eucharist to us, to the Church, but he also ensures its continuance by establishing his priesthood, a new priesthood for a new covenant. To the Apostles, and to their successors, bishops and priests, Jesus says: “Do this in remembrance of me.” In other words, he says to them, “Continue what I have begun. Share this great gift.” This is not an end but a beginning, and he entrusts this new beginning to those he calls as his priests.

We all know how ordinary these apostles were, how limited they were in their understanding, and how frail they were. And yet Jesus calls them to a new priesthood in his own body and blood. To these ordinary men, and to all the ordinary men who have come after them, Jesus has given an extraordinary power. He has given his priests the power to bring heaven to earth, to bring his very life to the altar, and to us. Whatever their flaws might have been, Jesus wanted his new priests to be his instruments, his co-workers in continuing the work of redemption. By definition, a priest offers sacrifice, and Jesus established a new priesthood upon his own sacrifice so that he might continue to share his body and blood, his very life, with people of all times and places. It is, like the Eucharist itself, a gift of love.

And how are we to respond to this gift? With awed silence? Definitely. What could be said before such a gift of love? But love that is given should evoke a response: love returned. Jesus not only loves us, but he also gives us an example of how to respond: by loving service. At that same Last Supper, Jesus takes on the attitude of a servant. He washes the feet of his disciples, and we need to realize that this was considered servile labor, the work of slaves. No respectable person would be expected to wash the feet of another, and yet that is exactly what Jesus did. He set aside his dignity as teacher and master, and took on the role of a servant, even a slave, to show the apostles what their attitude must be. Jesus teaches his followers, all of us, that no act of love or service is beneath them. They must love as he has loved. "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Jesus gave us the Eucharist so that we might have union with him and with his Father. But it is impossible to come into union with Jesus and his Father without coming into union with the other members of God's family. Such union must find its expression in charity, in self-giving love. This is why at the Last Supper Jesus gave both an example and a command of charity: as I have done, you also must do.

Tonight then, we celebrate our Lord's gift of love, and we worship and adore that living love in the Eucharist. But we also pledge to pass that love on to others as Jesus did to his friends. The events of the Last Supper were all about love, and love should be our response. That will be our greatest bequest.