

Homily for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper (Holy Thursday)
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
Washington, D.C. – March 29, 2018
Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio

My dear Brothers and Sisters: Four days ago, on Palm Sunday, we recalled God's example of humility, when Jesus accepted the humiliation of his Passion. Tonight, we marvel at God's charity, which Jesus revealed in the Eucharist, "the banquet of his love"ⁱ.

Mother Teresa – *Saint* Teresa of Calcutta – said: "Love, to be real, must cost; it must hurt; it must empty us of self."ⁱⁱ Our initial reaction to these words might be a kind of fear. Who of us wants to hurt, to experience pain? But the example of Jesus should give us hope to embrace this message. When our Savior gathered the Twelve for the Passover supper, he knew that the following day would bring great pain to him. Yet, he said to the Apostles: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus was eager to eat this sacred Supper with his friends, because "He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end."^{iv} Now, by giving them the sacrament of his body and blood, he would always be with them.

This kind of love that Jesus had for his disciples goes beyond mere "logic". It is like St. Bernard of Clairvaux said:

Love is sufficient of itself, it gives pleasure by itself and because of itself. It is its own merit, its own reward.... Its profit lies in its practice. I love because I love, I love that I may love.^v

The Apostle John makes sure to give the account of that other gesture that took place during supper: the washing of the feet. Perhaps John foresaw a danger in the way that future Christians might interpret the Eucharist. Perhaps he feared that some would see it only as a ritual to be repeated by an exclusive circle of religious people: people concerned with affirming their own righteousness. In order to prevent such a self-centered and lifeless approach to the "banquet of love", John records Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and then telling the disciples that what he has done for them, they must do for others.

We use the word "Eucharist" as a noun; but, in a sense, it must also act like a verb. The Eucharist is not a static, dead ritual which is meant only for the self-enrichment of those who are already "washed and saved". Rather, our celebration of the Eucharist must give rise to the dynamic, living action of love. Those who, because of God's mercy, are blessed to take and eat the body of the Lord, are also impelled to take and *give* the Lord's love to people who are "on the outside". How much stronger a message must our Holy Father give us, before we recognize that our Christian life must be directed outward? We cannot be a closed circle of believers who are content to practice the right rituals and follow the proper laws. We must be a people who, nourished by the very life of Jesus, go out to meet the ones who feel like they are "outside the law". We must let such people know that they are *not* outside of Christ's love for them. We must build a bridge for them, and accompany them so as to welcome them home to the heart of Christ.

Loving us cost Jesus everything. It hurt him. It earned him ridicule. It made him look like a fool. He was like the foolish father who welcomed home his prodigal son and made a feast for him. He was like the foolish shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to find the one who strayed, and who, when finding it, raised it to his shoulders with rejoicing. God loves with a “foolishness” that cannot be explained or justified by men whose hearts are hardened against his mercy.

My Brothers and Sisters: God has loved you and me in this very same way. By sharing in this most sacred Supper and imitating the humility of Jesus, we can love in this way too.

ⁱ Collect for Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper.

ⁱⁱ Mother Teresa, *In the Heart of the World: Thoughts, Stories, & Prayers*, p. 45, New World Library (2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Luke* 22:15.

^{iv} *John* 13:1.

^v St. Bernard, *Sermo 83, 4: Opera omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 2 (1958)*, 300. Used in the Office of Readings for the memorial of St. Bernard, Abbot and Doctor, *Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. IV*.