

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
20 March 2008

The Mass of the Lord's Supper
Holy Thursday

As we enter the Sacred Triduum - the three days celebrated as one - we celebrate the great truth that Jesus "loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

Through the institution of the Eucharist, Christ the Lord revealed his love "when he was about to die and commanded us to celebrate it as the new and eternal covenant."¹

In the Incarnation - which we celebrate each Christmas - the only Son of God abandoned the glory of heaven and took upon himself our frail humanity "not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28).

At his Last Supper, Jesus revealed himself as both Lord and Servant, as Master and slave.

"Fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power," (John 13:3) Christ Jesus allowed himself to be sold for "thirty pieces of silver" (Matthew 26:15), the price of a slave set down by Moses (cf. Exodus 21:32).

The Lord Jesus showed the depth of his loving service by washing the feet of the Apostles. Rising from the table,

¹ *Collect* of the day.

He who is "clothed in light as in a robe" was clad in a cloak (cf. Psalm 104:2). He who wraps the heavens in clouds wrapped round himself a towel. He who pours the water into rivers and pools tipped some water into a basin. And he before whom every knee bends in heaven and on earth and under the earth knelt to wash the feet of his disciples.²

Such is the wonder of the Master who makes himself the Servant!

He stoops down to wash away the filth that has gathered on their feet, and how much filth there is! There is the filth of disbelief, of greed, of jealousy and anger. There is the filth of laziness and fear, and even of self-love and betrayal. Nonetheless, the Lord of heaven and earth knelt down to wash away their filth, the very same filth that is on our feet!

Even today the Lord stoops down to wash away the filth of our sin through the Sacraments that he has entrusted to his Church. He washes our feet in Baptism and he nourishes us with the Eucharist. Christ Jesus continues to recline with us and to serve us through the ministry of his priests.

The washing of feet requires humility both from him who washes and from him who is washed. To kneel before another is no simple thing, for in our pride we think someone else should be kneeling before us. But when God himself kneels before us, this seems all the more unbearable. Yet, it is for this purpose that he has come.

² Severian of Gabala, *Homily on the Washing of Feet* in Thomas C. Oden et al, Ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament Vol. IVb *John* 11-21 (Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 2007), 86.

What response can be made to the generous and humble love that the Lord lavishes upon us? Nothing more than a humble heart, open and ready to receive and give love.

As Jesus associated the Apostles with himself and made them his priests through the washing of feet, so he wishes to associate men with himself in the same way today. Through his chosen men, Jesus wants to wash the feet of sinful and suffering humanity and to nourish us with his own Body and Blood in every time and place.

There are some young men today - perhaps even here with us tonight - who feel within their soul the words of the Psalmist:

How shall I make a return to the LORD
For all the good he has done for me?
The cup of salvation I will take up,
And I will upon the name of the LORD (Psalm 116:12-13).

To these men the command of Jesus, "Do this ... in remembrance of me," resonates particularly strongly (I Corinthians 11:25).

The mission of the priest is simple. He is to be always in the presence of the Lord handing on to others what he himself receives from the Lord (cf. I Corinthians 11:23).

The priest must therefore be a man of humility, one who is not afraid to wash away the filth of his sins and the sins of others.

The Church needs such men of strong and humble heart to carry out her mission to proclaim the Gospel to every nation.

So intimately is the priesthood and the Eucharist united, that there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist, just as there can be no Eucharist without the priesthood.

At the altar of the Lord, every priest acts *in persona Christi*. That is, he stands "in the person of Christ" in such a way that it is not so much the priest who consecrates but Christ himself. This is why the priest speaks in the first person, saying, "This is my Body...This is the cup of my Blood." The priest must be humble and allow Christ to use him as his instrument.

The priest, like Christ, must lay aside his "outer garment" of pride and personal ambition and stoop down to serve the Church, the Body of Christ.

But if this life of humble service is expected of his priests, it is also expected of all who are part of the Church, his Body, of which Christ himself is the head. Jesus says to his priests and to each of us, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (John 13:15).

So highly must the faithful value Jesus Christ that must be willing to sacrifice everything for him, each according to the way of life to which they are called.

Judas, the Iscariot, valued Christ Jesus very little, seeing only in him a servant, a means to attain a greater life

on earth. Thirty pieces of silver was all he valued him for and so he betrayed him.

But there is another who valued him greatly, Mary. The one who previously sat at his feet while her sister served (cf. Luke 10:38-42), anointed the feet of Jesus with an oil worth "three hundred days' wages" (John 12:5).

The question then comes to us: how highly do I value Jesus Christ? In what do I see in him? Is he worth giving my life to, or is he worth only thirty pieces of silver?

Look upon him and see in his humility. Look upon his humility and see his love. Do not turn him away when he bends down low to you, but accept his service in humble love, that you, too, may bend down low in humble service. Amen.