



The Holy See

MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Basilica of St. John Lateran
Holy Thursday, 12 April 1979*

1. The "hour" of Jesus has come. The hour of his passage from this world to the Father. The beginning of the Holy Triduum. The Easter mystery is again clothed, as every year, by its liturgical aspect, beginning with this mass which—alone during the year—bears the name of "Coena Domini".

Having loved his own who were in the world, "he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). The Last Supper is precisely the witness of this love with which Christ, the Lamb of God, loved us to the end.

On that evening, the children of Israel, according to the old prescription, ate the lamb given by Moses on the eve of their exodus from slavery in Egypt. Jesus does the same with the disciples, faithful to the tradition which was only the "shadow of the good things to come" (Heb. 10:1), only the symbol of the New Covenant and of the new Law.

2. What does it mean: "He loved them to the end"? It means: until that fulfilment which was to take place the following day, on Good Friday. On that day, God was to reveal how much he loved the world, and how, in that love, he had come to the extreme limit of giving, to the point, that is of "giving his only Son" (John 3:16). On that day, Christ showed that "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The love of the Father was revealed in the giving of the Son. In the giving through death.

Holy Thursday, the day of the Last Supper, is in some sense the prologue of this giving, and the last preparation for it. And, in some sense, what was accomplished on that day goes beyond such

a giving. It was just on Holy Thursday, during the Last Supper, that the meaning of: "He loved to the end", was revealed.

Rightly, in fact, we believe that loving *to the end* means until *death*, until the last breath. The last Supper teaches us, however, that, for Jesus, "to the end" means beyond the last breath. *Beyond death*.

3. This is, indeed, precisely the significance of the Eucharist. Death is not its end, but its beginning. The Eucharist begins with death, as St Paul teaches: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (Cor. 11:26).

The Eucharist is the fruit of this death. It recalls it constantly. It continually renews it. It always signifies it. It proclaims it. The death which has become the beginning of the new Coming: from the Resurrection to the Parousia, "until he comes". The death which is *the foundation of a new life*.

Loving "to the end" means therefore, for Christ, loving through death and beyond the barrier of death: *loving as far as the extremes of the Eucharist!*

4. It was just in this manner that Jesus loved on that last evening. He loved his "own"—those who were then with him—and all those who were to inherit the mystery from them.

— The words he pronounced over the bread,

— the words he pronounced over the cup full of wine,

— the words we repeat today with particular emotion, and always repeat when we celebrate the Eucharist,

are precisely the revelation of this love through which, once and for all, for all time and until the end of the ages, he shared himself! Even before *giving himself* on the cross, as the "Lamb who takes away the sins of the world", he shared himself as food and drink: bread and wine, so that "they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

It was thus that he "loved to the end".

5. Therefore, Jesus did not hesitate to kneel before the Apostles to wash their feet. When Simon Peter opposed it, he persuaded him to let him do so. It was, in fact, a particular need of the moment's greatness. This washing of the feet, this purification before the Communion in which they were henceforth to participate, was necessary.

It was necessary. Christ himself felt the need to humble himself at the feet of his disciples: a humbling which tells us so much of him at the moment. From that time onwards, by sharing himself in the eucharistic communion, would he not continually lower himself to the level of so many human hearts? Would he not always serve them in this way?

"Eucharist" means "thanksgiving".

"Eucharist" also means "service", the reaching out towards man: *the serving of so many human hearts*.

I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15).

We cannot be dispensers of the Eucharist unless by serving!

6. Now is the Last Supper. Christ prepares himself to *depart through death*, and through death itself prepares to remain.

Thus, death has become the fulfilment of love: he loved us "to the end".

Would not the context of the Last Supper in itself be enough to give Jesus the "right" to say to us all: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12)?

© Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana