



The Holy See

MASS OF THE “LAST SUPPER”

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Holy Thursday, 20 April 2000

1. “I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk 22:15). With these words, Christ declares the prophetic meaning of the Passover Meal which he is about to celebrate with the disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. In the First Reading from the Book of Exodus, the liturgy shows how the Passover of the Old Covenant provides the context for the Passover of Jesus. For the Israelites, the Passover was a remembrance of the meal eaten by their forefathers at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the liberation from slavery. The sacred text prescribed that some of the lamb’s blood should be placed on the doorposts and the lintel of the houses. And it went on to stipulate how the lamb was to be eaten: “your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste... For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down all the first-born... The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass you by, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you” (Ex 12:11-13). The blood of the lamb won for the sons and daughters of Israel liberation from the slavery of Egypt, under the leadership of Moses. The remembrance of so extraordinary an event became a festive occasion for the people, who thanked the Lord for freedom regained, a divine gift and an enduringly relevant human task: “This day will be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord” (Ex 12:14). It is the Passover of the Lord! The Passover of the Old Covenant! 2. “I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk 22:15). In the Upper Room, Christ ate the Passover Meal with his disciples in obedience to the Old Covenant prescriptions, but he gave the rite new substance. We have heard how Saint Paul explains it in the Second Reading, taken from the First Letter to the Corinthians. This text, which is thought to be the oldest account of the Lord’s Supper, recalls that Jesus, “on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body which is [given] for you. Do this in remembrance of me’. In the same way also the cup at the end of the meal, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:23-26). These are solemn words which hand on for all time the memorial of the institution of the Eucharist. Each year, on this day, we remember them as we return spiritually to the Upper Room. This evening I re-evoked them with particular emotion, because fresh in my mind and heart is the image of the Upper Room, where I had the joy of celebrating the Eucharist during my recent Jubilee pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This emotion is still stronger, because this year is the Year of the Jubilee of the two thousandth anniversary of the Incarnation. Seen in this light, our celebration this evening takes on an especially profound meaning. In the Upper Room,

Jesus filled the old traditions with new meaning and foreshadowed the events of the following day, when his Body, the spotless body of the Lamb of God, was to be sacrificed and his Blood poured out for the world's redemption. The Word took flesh precisely with this event in view, looking to the Passover of Christ, the Passover of the New Covenant!³ "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The Apostle urges us to make constant memorial of this mystery. At the same time, he invites us to live each day our mission as witnesses and heralds of the love of the Crucified Lord, as we await his return in glory. But how are we to make memorial of this saving event? How are we to live as we await Christ's return? Before instituting the Sacrament of his Body and Blood, Christ bent down and knelt, as a slave would do, to wash the disciples' feet in the Upper Room. We watch him as he accomplishes this gesture, which in the Hebrew culture was the task of servants and the humblest persons in the household. Peter at first refuses, but the Master convinces him, and he too in the end, together with the other disciples, allows his feet to be washed. Immediately afterwards, however, clothed once more and seated at table, Jesus explains the meaning of his gesture: "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought also wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:12-14). These are words which link the Eucharistic mystery to the service of love, and may therefore be seen as a preparation for the institution of the ministerial priesthood. In instituting the Eucharist, Jesus gives the Apostles a share as ministers in his priesthood, the priesthood of the new and eternal Covenant. In this Covenant, he and he alone is always and everywhere the source and the minister of the Eucharist. The Apostles in turn become ministers of this exalted mystery of faith, destined to endure until the end of the world. At the same time they become servants of all those who will share in so great a gift and mystery. The Eucharist, the supreme Sacrament of the Church, is joined to the ministerial priesthood, which also comes to birth in the Upper Room, as the gift of the great love of the One who, knowing "that his hour had come to depart from this world to the Father [and] having loved his own who were in the world. . . loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). The Eucharist, the priesthood and the new commandment of love! This is the living memorial which we have before our eyes on Holy Thursday. "Do this in memory of me": this is the Passover of the Church! This is our Passover! © Copyright 2000 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana