

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
EVENING MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER
THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 2020
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C.

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis and express his spiritual closeness to all of you, assuring you of his prayers, as we being this Sacred Triduum, the climax of the Church's liturgical year. In a special way, I want to express not only the Holy Father's closeness but also mine to all those joining this liturgy by television and the internet, especially the sick, the suffering, and the homebound.

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.

In any ordinary year, this liturgy would be marked by the Washing of the Feet and a Eucharistic Procession. St. John's Gospel, of course, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, mentions the Washing of the Feet; while St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, recounts the institution of the Eucharist on the night Jesus was to be handed over.

The great bishop, St. Charles Borromeo, who heroically ministered to his flock during the plague in Milan, reflecting on this passage from St. Paul, commented on those words – *on the night he was to be handed over* – that is, betrayed:

... the same night in which he was betrayed; at the time when so many traps were being laid for him by his disciple (Judas), to whom he himself had done so much good; the time of so many injuries, such opprobrium, so many torments, and finally death itself ... at that time and hour, Christ was preparing a most singular benefit for sinful men still hostile to him. He was mixing such a powerful medicine for us who were sick; he was providing delightful food to us who were famished. See, O Man, what kind of injuries he was repaying, and with what benefits he answered vicious deeds done to him! (Charles Borromeo, Homily at Compline on the Feast of Corpus Christi, 9 June 1583)

Even as Judas and others prepared His death, Jesus was loving them – His friends – to the end! In these days of the pandemic, we are simultaneously heartbroken, that without the public celebration of Mass in many places, the faithful cannot receive this medicine and this delightful food, *and* we are edified by their faith – their Eucharistic hunger. It is a desire for friendship and love!

The Lord has a desire to give Himself to His people – even fragile, weak people – and, the desire of the People of God to receive this gift is growing daily. *He loved his own in the world and He loved them to the end.* Christ, our High Priest and Victim, did not disdain and does not disdain to become food for His people. Of this, elsewhere St. Charles writes: "O most singular favor bestowed on us by God! O inexplicable love of God toward us! Only love impelled God to do so much!" (Homily at Mass on Corpus Christi, 9 June 1583)

What motivated Christ to do this? Love. The Eucharist is rightly called the Sacrament of Charity. No one has ever desired anything more than the Triune God desires to share His life with us. It was God's love for us that motivated His plan to save us through the Birth, Death and Resurrection of His Son. It was God's love that motivated the sending of the Holy Spirit to sanctify us and make us holy. We were created so that God could share His life with us.

The Son was sent into the world, and He freely and readily came into this world to save us from our sins that would have made it impossible for us to share in the life He wishes us to have. He willingly allowed Himself to be handed over for us, because He loves us and wants us to share in this life. This sharing in His life – the sharing in the life of another – is what we often call friendship.

At the Last Supper, Jesus was gathered with his friends and deeply desired for them to share deeply in His life. In the Eucharist, He is with us. St. Thomas says that, "It is the law of friendship that friends should live together ... Christ has not left us without his bodily presence on our pilgrimage, but He joins us to Himself in this sacrament in the reality of His Body and Blood." (*Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 75, art 1.)

Given that it was always God's plan for us to share in the intimacy of Divine Life, which is a communion of love, it makes perfect sense that Jesus would make this gift of Himself to His friends. This friendship is expressed in the Eucharistic sacrifice; the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper anticipated Christ's offering on the Cross.

There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, St. John Paul II wrote:

This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only *after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there. ... What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes "to the end" (cf. *Jn 13:1*), a love which knows no measure. (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, 11)

This evening we offer this same sacrifice in obedience to the Savior's command. The Preface for the Liturgy states:

"For he is the true and eternal Priest, who instituted the pattern of an everlasting sacrifice and was the first to offer himself as the saving Victim, commanding us to make this offering as his memorial. As we eat his flesh that was sacrificed for us, we are made strong, and as we drink his Blood that was poured out for us, we are washed clean."

This evening we are invited to return His love – to commit ourselves to deepening our friendship with the Lord Jesus and with all those whom He loves. Indeed, we as Catholics, called to share in the Divine Life, are called also to model this sacrificial love. With humility, we bend our knees to wash the feet of others, especially, in these days, of the sick and the suffering. With gratitude for the love the Lord has shown us, we offer ourselves in love for others.

I am particularly moved by the heroism, not only of those priests who have offered pastoral care to the sick, but also of the doctors, nurses, and emergency personnel, who at great personal sacrifice, are

tending to the sick and vulnerable. They are offering us a witness to a Eucharistic way of living. God calls each of us, in his or her own, to share in His life – to be His friend.

This friendship with Christ came at a price: He gave up His Body and Blood *for us*. In His sacrificial passion and death and in his glorious resurrection, Christ restored our friendship with God. And even if circumstances prevent you from receiving Him sacramentally now, do not – never – doubt His love for you. *He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.*