

Holy Thursday – Year B

Let us pray, “Father, for your glory and our salvation you appointed Jesus Christ eternal High Priest. May the people he gained for you by his blood come to share in the power of his Cross and resurrection by celebrating his memorial in this Eucharist, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.”

These words serve as the opening prayer for tonight’s Holy Thursday liturgy. They are worth repeating in as much as they mention the two realities that are synonymous with Holy Thursday, namely, priesthood and Eucharist.

Earlier today at St. Paul’s Cathedral, Bishop Wuerl presided at the annual Chrism Mass. It is the one day set aside to bless the Holy oils which are brought back to the individual parishes for sacramental use. This is also the day when the priests renew their priestly promises. As Jesus Christ was appointed eternal High Priest, those of us ordained share in his ministry. And even with all of the controversy and scandal that has surrounded priesthood in recent years, it remains the greatest fraternity in the world. And on a personal note, it is a privileged joy to be a priest. Please join me tonight in thanking Almighty God for this precious gift and pray that more men will respond to God’s call to serve his Church at the altar as a priest. Priesthood is not only a happy life, but also a life worth living.

Tonight, though, the Church celebrates in a special way the institution of the Eucharist in this Mass of the Lord’s Supper. We recall the sacred words of Jesus uttered by the priest, “Take this all of you and eat. This is my body.... Take this all of you and drink. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.” And with grateful hearts we receive this body and blood of Jesus and are nourished and strengthened in faith. What an awesome gift – Jesus’ body and blood. Wow!

And yet, while we celebrate the priesthood and Eucharist on this Holy Thursday, there is something very uncomfortable to this night. This uncomfortability is found in tonight’s Gospel as Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. Peter articulates this uncomfortability when he asks the question, “Master, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus responds with one of the great lines of scripture that beckons faith. He says, “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.” Still, Peter vehemently expresses his uncomfortability. “You will never wash my feet.” Of course, Peter eats his words and learns to never say never.

Jesus then proceeds to wash the feet of his apostles. In ancient times, the roads in Palestine were unpaved. They carried the debris of animals, dust, dirt, and the desert. That is why at each household door there was a water pot and a servant to clean one’s feet. On this particular night, Jesus becomes the servant. And then when finished he says, “I have given you a model to follow so that as I have done for you, you should also do.”

Tonight this sacred ritual of feet washing will be reenacted as the feet of twelve Ladies of Charity will be washed. In so many ways, they are the modern day disciples who preach the Good News by their deeds of visiting the sick, assisting the poor and needy, burying the dead, and washing the feet of strangers. Through their efforts they exemplify humble service which is not about comfort and convenience, but conversion and commitment.

With Sr. Dorothy and our entire parish family, I wish to thank you for all that you do to build God’s kingdom in Penn Hills where the roads are just as dirty as those in ancient Palestine, the needs are just as great, and the work, although uncomfortable, is just as rewarding.