

## ***Conversion and Conversation.***

Homily for Holy Thursday, 2022

On this Holy Thursday I want to talk about two words, conversion and conversation and then conclude by talking briefly about how priests are to facilitate conversions that result in godly conversations.

What sets us apart from the rest of the created order that God has so wonderfully made is our capacity for language. Words shape who we are and how we engage with the world in which we live. Words are thereby the way God also communicates with us. In today's readings from Exodus and 1 Corinthians reference is made to the centrality of Liturgy. Liturgy is all about words and ritual actions. Listen again to this verse from Exodus:

***This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.***

There are two words here I want to highlight from this verse. When we remember something, we are calling to mind, something that occurred in the past. We are framing language to re-collect. This is further heightened by the second word I want to mention "ordinance". Now an ordinance is a direction, a command, or a way to bring about order. Think again about the word "recollect". When we remember we are collecting again, putting into order, events from the past that then impact us in the present.

This is a practise that was central to Judaism as the recalling of the Passover event was ordered into a liturgical celebration called the Passover Seder that has now been kept for thousands of years. It is the Jewish People's primary way to order and re-collect their story. Now with this language of "recollection" and ordinance in mind listen again to St. Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:

***For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you***

What is Paul doing here? He is re-collecting what the Lord had given to him and now passing it on so it can be re-collected by the Corinthian Christians. What is it they are remembering? Jesus' celebration of the Passover where he reenacted the Liturgy prescribed in Exodus 12. However, in his keeping of this ordinance he gives new meaning to these ancient words. Now the bread does not only bring to mind the haste with which the first Passover had to be eaten but is also the fulfillment of the Mana eaten by the Israelites during their Sinai wanderings. This is now the bread that will become the very body of Christ which sustains us through our dessert wanderings in this world. The cup will now fulfill the words spoken centuries earlier in Psalm 116, sung this evening:

***I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the Lord,***

<sup>14</sup> ***I will pay my vows to the Lord  
in the presence of all his people.***

<sup>15</sup> ***Precious in the sight of the Lord  
is the death of his faithful ones.***

*O Lord, I am your servant;  
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl*

Jesus now declares that in him this psalm finds its fulfillment because the Cup of Salvation becomes the Chalice of the Eucharist where we recall the death of the precious one, the child of the serving girl Mary. What is it that the conversation that makes up the Liturgy is to bring about? Our deeper conversion.

Let me explain it to you this way. In the Liturgy we give order to words and actions. The first part of the Mass is the ordering of words, as we hear from Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel. This written word is proclaimed as the oral word, when it is read aloud. But what then happens? The congregation hears and receives the word, facilitated, the preacher hopes, by the homily. Then the written and oral word becomes the imparted word. This word is now within us, part of us. But not only is the word imparted to us, through the readings and homily. Something else then occurs. We have the recollected action of the Last Supper, where we live out what St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11.

Here is the beauty of this Liturgical ordinance. Not only has the Word been imparted to us, but now as we come forward at Communion, the Word made flesh is imparted to be within us as we eat Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity. At every Mass we receive the Word made flesh, Jesus, so that in turn we might leave Mass as those who will now be the living word of God in the World.

In the Solemn Blessing that is announced at the end of Mass during Passiontide the Celebrant declares:

*May God, the Father of mercies,  
who has given you an example of love  
in the Passion of his Only Begotten Son,  
grant that, by serving God and your neighbor,  
you may lay hold of the wondrous gift of his blessing.<sup>1</sup>*

Did you hear how this blessing inspires us to be the living word? As we learn by grace to serve both God and neighbour, we will lay hold of the wondrous gift of his blessings. The written word, becoming the oral word, becoming the imparted word so that we will then be the living word. Do you hear the movement I am presenting here?

Our deepening conversion happens through our active participation in the Liturgy so our lives can be more fully conformed to the Cross. When we discover that our lives are part of this great Liturgical story, which is what conversion is all about then our conversations will embody the living Word, Jesus.

I want to say one more thing about the word “conversation”. We think of conversation as a verb but there is a 14<sup>th</sup> century usage where it was incorporated in speech as a noun. It meant:

***“The place where one lives and dwells” and also meant  
“the manner of conducting oneself in the world.”***

How are we to conduct ourselves in the world? By living out these words of Jesus:

***<sup>14</sup>If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you<sup>2</sup>***

Conversion leads to the noun of conversation which is to live in loving service of others.

Oh, but how hard this is for us to do. For in each of us human self-centeredness makes it so hard for us to hear these words of Jesus and put them into action.

This is one of the reasons why Jesus has given to us the priesthood. For priests are to be men who in an intentional way have responded to the call to allow their lives to be a sign. A sign where the conversion and conversation of the Cross come together as they purposefully give themselves to service as Jesus did, for they are persona Christi, the person of Christ in the Parish in a sacramental way.

I want to point out one more thing about the word “conversation”. The letters that make it different from the word conversions spell the word “at”. It is only when our lives meet at the Cross that conversion can happen so that our conversation reflects who we are as followers of Jesus.

What an honour and responsibility it is to live this Cross shaped life, and nothing gives priests more joy than to help Jesus' beloved people come to deeper conversion so that in their conversation they become people who truly are Christians. People in whom the written word has become the imparted word so they can then be the living word of Jesus in the world.