

Dual Communion

Homily for Holy Thursday April 6, 2023

A few years ago, the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, did a study on why people desire euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. The researchers did in-depth interviews with people suffering from HIV-1 and AIDS. They came up with this answer:

"Participants desired euthanasia or assisted suicide because of disintegration and loss of community, which combined to create a perception of loss of self."

In other words, the sick and helpless said, in various ways, "I am no longer who I was." And this led them to conclude, "I should be allowed to die with my dignity intact."

But why would these people feel that they were no longer themselves?

That's where "loss of community" comes in.

They found that the people who used to care about them didn't care about them anymore now that they were sick and dying. They saw that their feet were filthy, but no one came by to wash them, and so they conclude that they are not worth washing, and they lose hope. At that point, death starts to look like a solution, a way to stop spiraling further into worthlessness.

The antidote is Christ-like love. They need someone to wash their feet, to remind them that in God's eyes, they still matter, they will always matter. This is the message that every human heart needs to receive, the message that a healthy society knows how to send.

It is this theme that is at the heart of today's Mass. As we discover what it is to have communion with God, in the Eucharist, we learn the way of communion with one another, which is self giving love.

Communion with God is the way we learn to give God his true worth, that is worship. This is what we do in the Mass. Communion with one another is the way we learn to give people their true worth, which is to treat them with dignity, this is service. Pope Francis said:

Our life spreads light when it is given in service. The secret of joy is living to serve.

Worship of God and service extended one to another is the theme I want to explore with you this evening.

The dual nature of our calling: Communion with God and Communion with others is stated at every Mass. After the gifts of bread and wine have been received and have been thankfully prepared to become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus the priest then says:

Pray brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father.

What is a sacrifice? It is the offering of ourselves to another. In hockey players will sacrifice their bodies by lying in front of a puck travelling at 90 miles an hour to protect their net. People learning medicine will sacrifice years to study the art and science of their profession. Parents will sacrifice sleep to attend to their crying baby at 3 AM. Jesus offers his body in sacrifice to forgive us and bring us into the sphere of his saving, healing, and redeeming love. In the Mass the sacrifice we offer is of our time to truly worship God and to then choose to live in the world in service of others. This is the sacrifice acceptable to God, which is restated when the congregation says in response:

May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church.

Notice the dual nature of this response. The sacrifice that the priest will offer, is Jesus Christ in his Eucharist, which is for the praise and glory of his name, this is worship, and for our good and the good of all his holy Church, this is service. As we see Jesus in His Eucharist, we are invited to see Jesus in the people all around us. As we reverence his body on the Altar, we are to also reverence his body in those to our left and right. As we learn this way of dual sacrifice it will be to his praise and glory and for our good and the good of his holy Church.

Now how does this sacrifice give praise and glory to his name.

The very first thing Jesus did when he instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist on Holy Thursday, according to the Gospels, is this: He looked up to heaven and gave thanks to his Father. That is not an extra, not accidental, not an addition. In our reading from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians for today, that is the first thing Paul mentions too: "after he had given thanks, [Jesus] broke [the bread] and said, 'This is my body.'" And the Psalm for today, which foretells the Eucharist, begins with these words: "How shall I make a return [that is, a thanksgiving] to the Lord for all the good he has done for me? The cup of salvation I will take up."

The very word "Eucharist" means literally "good gift," or "good for which we give thanks." Gratitude, which is the motive behind all thanksgiving, is a necessary requirement for any and all religion. You cannot have any real relationship with the real God who is the giver of every good gift, both natural and supernatural—you cannot have any relationship with God at all, you cannot have any religion at all, if you simply take for granted all the good things you have received, starting with your very existence, your physical conception in your mother's womb (the fact that your mother did not abort you) and your birth, which you celebrate every year. Why do we celebrate birthdays? Only because we see our birth as a gift. We do not celebrate April 30th when we pay our taxes.¹

We can all learn from Piglet. We are told that Piglet noticed that even though he had a very small heart, it could hold a rather large amount of gratitude.

This is the gift we offer to the praise of his name, our thanks. And as we offer this gift of our true worship to God in thanksgiving we can then learn to offer ourselves to others in true service,

¹ Kreeft, Peter. Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle A) (pp. 302-303). Kindle Edition.

which is what we discover is at the heart of today's Gospel reading. Jesus says one line here that I want to focus on. When Peter objects to the Lord washing his feet, Jesus says:

“Unless I wash you, have no share with me”.

Do you see what Jesus is saying here? Peter unless you receive the gift of my humble service in the washing of your feet, and unless you receive the gift of my humble presence in the Eucharist you have no part of me. Jesus in this simple act of service invites us to discover that our lives are to be offered up in following the Lord's example.

You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.... That you also should do as I have done to you.

So, what is Jesus getting at here? Perhaps the following story will help. In the inshore fishery of Newfoundland and Labrador, a crew is made up of four people, and every boat was understood to involve five shares – one for each crew member and one for the boat itself. When the profits were tallied at the end of the fishing season, they were split five ways – one to pay each person, and one to cover the expenses of operating the boat. The four crew members and the boat itself shared equally in the profit made through the fishing season, and also in any loss.

In this context “to have a share” expresses a way of viewing part of a community in which the success of one contributes to the success of all, and the struggle and trial of one is shared by all. It speaks of interdependence and resilience.

On this Holy Thursday as we remember why Jesus gave us this meal, may we discover ever more that we are called to a life of dual communion with God and with one another. When we attentively live this way, the Mass will become that place where in sharing in the sacrifice of Jesus which is to the praise and glory of his name, we will then offer our lives in sacrifice to others. This is a way of understanding what it means to be part of Jesus 'crew. We have committed ourselves to foot-washing, to love expressed in practical and compassionate action.