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Meditations: Holy Thursday

Reflections for Holy Thursday. The topics are: Jesus washes the apostles' feet; God gives himself to us in the Eucharist; giving thanks for the Eucharist and for the priesthood.

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“NOW BEFORE the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.’ The reader of this

verse from Saint John's Gospel is brought to understand that a great event is about to take place. The introduction is full of tender affection ... Let us begin," Saint Josemaria advises us, "by asking the Holy Spirit, from this moment on, to give us the grace to understand every word and gesture of Christ."[1] Today, our eagerness to be attentive to all that our Lord does leads us to contemplate his eloquent gesture of washing his apostles' feet.

At the Last Supper, with the Passion now near, the atmosphere was one of love, intimacy and recollection. "Since Jesus knew that the Father had placed everything in his hands and that he had gone out from God and was returning to God, he rose from supper, took off his robe, took a towel and put it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel

which he had put around his waist” (*Jn 12:3-5*). The apostles would have been shocked to see Jesus doing something normally only carried out by a servant. But over time they would have come to understand what Jesus wanted to tell them. Even today we may find it difficult to imagine God putting himself in such a position, wiping the dust and dirt from his friends’ feet with his own hands.

Letting Christ wash us means recognizing that we cannot purify, clean or sanctify ourselves. “This truth is hard to grasp: if I do not let the Lord serve me, wash me, strengthen me, forgive me, I will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven ... God saved us by serving us. We often think we are the ones who serve God. No, he is the one who freely chose to serve us, for he loved us first. It is difficult to love and not be loved in return. And it is even more difficult

to serve if we do not let ourselves be served by God.”[2] This is the Christian paradox: it is God who acts first; it is He who takes the initiative. This is why, before undertaking any apostolic work, it is so important to learn to receive what God wants to give us, to let him cleanse us again and again.

THE SIGHT of Jesus washing his apostles’ feet should never cease to amaze us. But his love and humility go infinitely further during the supper: “He 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.’ And in the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; as often as you drink it, do this in remembrance of me’” (*1 Cor* 11:23-25).

Our Lord “instituted this sacrament as a perpetual memorial of his Passion, as a fulfillment of the ancient figures, as the greatest miracle He had performed and the greatest consolation for those He would leave saddened by his absence.”^[3] Jesus gives Himself to us. The bread and wine become his Body and Blood for us: it is at once a sign of superabundant love and the greatest possible expression of humility. The Sacrament of the Eucharist enables us to identify ourselves with the Beloved, to become one and the same with Him, to be united as intimately as possible with God. Saint Josemaría said that “our Lord Jesus Christ, as though all the other proofs of his mercy were insufficient, institutes the Eucharist so that he can always be close to us. We can only understand up to a point that he does so because Love moves him, who needs nothing, not to want to be separated from us. The

Blessed Trinity has fallen in love with man.”[4]

We cannot get over our astonishment. No matter how much we consider all that God the Father has given us, we will never be able to understand it: “It is the medicine of immortality, the antidote to death, the remedy enabling us to live in Christ forever.”[5] We do not deserve such great care, affection and attention. We want to try to respond as well as possible, but to do so we need God’s help. “What comes first is not our effort, or moral capacity. Christianity is first and foremost a gift: God gives himself to us. He does not give something, but himself ... This is why the central act of Christian life is the Eucharist: gratitude for having received his gifts, joy for the new life that he gives us.”[6]

IN THE PRIEST'S WORDS before the consecration we see Jesus' grateful attitude towards God the Father: "he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying...". We want to have the same attitude today, on the eve of the Passion. Generosity grows naturally from gratitude for the new life we have received, and we want to share it with others. We want to try to love those Jesus loves, as he loves them: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (*Jn 13:34*). Through Christ, with Him and in Him, we are capable of loving to the end. Like Jesus, we kneel before people to clean their feet. We understand their miseries and carry them on our shoulders.

Judgment, envy and comparisons disappear, transformed into petition, joy and gratitude to God for the

wonders he works in others. “The Most Blessed Eucharist contains the entire spiritual good of the Church, that is, Christ himself, our Pasch and Living Bread, which by the action of the Holy Spirit through his very flesh gives life to men.”^[7] From there we draw the strength we need to bring Christ’s life to the hearts of the people around us, and to every corner of the world.

Holy Thursday, the day God gave the Church the Sacrament of the Eucharist, is also a day to pray for the holiness of all priests, that they may always serve the Church with the same love our Lord had. With our prayer we can help them make a reality of the deepest desire that moves them as priests: “This practical aspect of service is important: that it is not we who choose what to do, but we are servants of Christ in the Church. We work as the Church tells us, where

the Church calls us, and we try to be precisely this: servants who do not do their own will, but the will of the Lord. Let us truly be in the Church ambassadors for Christ and servants of the Gospel.”[8]

Among so many other gifts, during these days Jesus will also give us the gift of his Mother. We turn to our Lady, the principal witness of Christ’s Sacrifice, asking for help to live a life of humble gratitude for all we have received.

(Image: "Christ Washing the Disciples' Feet," Tintoretto. Wiki Commons)

[1] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 83.

[2] Francis, Homily, 5 April 2020.

[3] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57*, On the feast of Corpus Christi, lect. 1-4.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 84.

[5] Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 90.

[6] Benedict XVI, Homily, 20 March 2008.

[7] Second Vatican Council, Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 5.

[8] Benedict XVI, *Lectio divina*, 10 March 2011.