

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY THURSDAY, MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER – APRIL 18, 2019
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

At the beginning of this Sacred Triduum, as the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to this country, I wish to assure you of His Holiness' prayers and heartfelt affection for you and your families as we celebrate these holiest days of the Church's liturgical year.

This evening we celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper. It was on this evening that the Lord celebrated Passover with His Apostles, instituting both the Sacred Priesthood and the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. The Gospel is taken from the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John and recalls the love of Christ for His Apostles, when He humbled Himself to wash their feet. This evening I would like to reflect with you on this washing of feet.

Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. God loves his creatures. When God made our first parents, He saw all that He had made and declared His creation to be *very good*. When our first parents disobeyed God, His love for them did not stop. In His love, God conceived a plan for our salvation. God's love endures forever. God even chose a special people to be His own – the descendants of Abraham. When the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, He heard their cries and delivered them by the strong hand of Moses and led them to freedom. He entered into a covenant with them, and even if they were not always faithful to its terms, His faithful love did not cease. He sent to them prophets to win their hearts back to him.

Finally, He sent them His Son. The Mighty God came down from heaven, and *the Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us*. As we heard on Sunday, he emptied Himself and took the form of a slave, becoming obedient even unto death on a cross. *He loved them to the end*. Yes, God descends; He makes Himself low to lift us up. At that Last Supper, Jesus once more made Himself low, kneeling before His own disciples and carried out the service of a slave, washing their feet.

Washing another's feet was a sign of hospitality and welcome. Jesus had reproved Simon the Pharisee for not washing his feet when He entered his home; meanwhile, the sinful woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, because she loved much. St. Paul too would not admit to the Order of Widows those women who had not washed the feet of the saints. Washing another's feet was a truly humble gesture. Jesus wanted to make His disciples welcome and clean, fit to partake of God's banquet, fit to take their place at His table. He, who was their Master and Teacher, did not consider it beneath His dignity to wash the feet of his own followers – fisherman, tax collectors, a zealot, and even a thief!

Taking off his outer vestments and girding himself in linen, symbolic of priestly attire, the Son of God carried out a task that was usually left to the lowest class of men. He did this by Himself. He poured the water. He washed their feet. He dried them. Why?

Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. He did these things because of His immense love for us. He also says: *I have given you a model to follow, so that as*

I have done for you, you should also do. Jesus wanted to communicate God's love and to give an example to His Church's priests and His disciples of how to live – in humble service!

Jesus wanted to communicate God's love. Our God is not simply a God who is high in the sky, unknowable, and impersonal. No. Our God draws near to us. In His love, he is concerned about small things, and since He knows that we are made in His image and likeness, He sees us not as small and insignificant, but as great and worthy of His love. Jesus draws near to give us a share in the love He shares with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

He is near to us in the Sacrament of His Love, which He left us as a perpetual memorial – the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. This He gave to us, and in this Sacrament, He remains with His Church, even in the darkest times, even until the end of time, because despite human weakness and sinfulness, even in the Church's ministers, His love for us does not cease.

In the Gospel, Jesus washed the feet of *all* of His disciples. He even washed the feet of Judas, such was His love. Knowing what Judas would do, He still loved Him. Still, Jesus says: *You are clean, but not all.* God loves us, but He does not force His love upon us. Judas' love for money, his wanting to esteem himself among the enemies of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and his lack of true concern for the poor are reminders of what it means to be unclean. He lives his life by worldly criteria of success, and, in the process, forgets about love. Not only does he forget about love, he rejects Love itself. He values money and things over communion with Jesus. He lived a double-life, claiming to be a follower, one of the chosen Twelve, but without loving the Master.

Of this mystery of iniquity, St. Charles Borromeo writes: "In this affair, we can only stand in wonderment at the detestable perversity of the traitor who could not be moved by fear of the Lord, nor reverence for his majesty, nor by the innocence of life, nor by the magnitude of the benefits he had received."

This should cause all of us to pause to reflect on our own lives and fidelity to the Lord, to thank Him for the many blessings and graces we have received. We can ask ourselves: On what is my heart truly set – the things of this world or the things of the Lord? Furthermore, we are invited to consider the goodness of the Lord.

St. Charles continues: "But all the more worthy of wonder is the goodness of the Lord, who seeing and knowing the obstinacy of the traitor, did not cease to treat him with goodness and instead tried to soften his obdurate heart with every kind of benefit, leaving us an example so that we too might seek rather the conversion of our enemies rather than their ruin, and try to gain their souls rather than lose them" (In *Sancti Caroli Borromei Homiliae*, ed. Joseph A. Sax, Milano: Ioseph Marcellum, 1747-1748, vol. 1, Homilia II, 8-15)

I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. If we are to learn anything from the Lord, it ought to be His goodness, even toward sinners. Tonight, we celebrate the goodness of the Lord in giving us the gifts of the priesthood and the Eucharist. We recall that He came to save us from our sins, not by threatening us with judgment, but by winning our hearts with the warmth of His Love, which flows from His Sacred Heart on which the Beloved Disciples rested his head.

It is precisely the Divine Goodness that purifies us and makes us clean. Some will soon be washed in the waters of baptism and be made a new creation. Others will experience His

Mercy through the ministry of priests in the Sacrament of Penance by which we are made clean and fit to dine once again at His Banquet. He washes us, make us whole and holy, so that we may dine with Him at the Eucharistic Feast in this world below and, by His grace and love, which never fail, may be His guests at the Eternal Nuptial Banquet in His Father's House.