

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY THURSDAY, MASS OF THE LORD’S SUPPER
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 Pope Francis’ 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, at which Christ instituted the Sacred Priesthood and the Sacrament of His Body and Blood.

The rubric in the *Roman Missal* instructs the preacher, saying: “the homily should explain the principal mysteries that are commemorated in this Mass: the institution of the Eucharist, the institution of the priesthood and Christ’s commandment of brotherly love.”

These mysteries are a celebration of God’s nearness to His People. The Eucharist, whose institution occurs at the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels, is a sacrament of the closeness of God. In the Eucharist, God does not give us a “thing,” a reward for the privileged few; rather, He offers us Himself. He offers us His own Body and Blood, echoing the words of the Gospel: *Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.* He gives us the totality of His life.

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, leaving them an example and making them priests at the Last Supper. Through the priesthood, the whole Church experiences the closeness of God.

Recently, in addressing a symposium on the priesthood, the Holy Father mentioned the need for the priest to be close to the people. Pope Francis said:

“Closeness to the People of God, a closeness that, enriched by those other forms of closeness, invites and indeed demands that we imitate the Lord’s own “style”. That style is one of closeness, compassion and tenderness, in which we act not as judges, but as Good Samaritans who acknowledge the wounds of our people, their silent sufferings, the self-denial and sacrifices made by so many fathers and mothers ... A style of closeness that allows us to pour balm upon wounds and to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord (cf. Is 61:2). It is imperative to remember that the people of God are hoping to find shepherds in the style of Jesus.” (ADDRESS TO PARTICIPANTS AT THE SYMPOSIUM PROMOTED BY THE CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS, 17 FEBRUARY 2022)

What is this style of Jesus, if not closeness? *Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.* During the Last Supper, Jesus gives His disciples the commandment to love one another as He has loved us. The next day, He will demonstrate what loving them to the end will look like.

But even at the Last Supper, He shows the depths of His love in action with the simple gesture of washing His disciples' feet, the gesture of a slave, who would wash his master's feet after a long, dirty, muddy journey. That Jesus himself would take on the form of a slave and do this service for His disciples reveals that there was and is nothing He would not do to serve and save us. Most people would feel very uncomfortable at that type of service, but Jesus insists on performing the gesture.

In the ancient world, to approach God, one had to be ritually clean. Many religions had purification rituals. Jesus' gesture of washing His disciples' feet was a type of purification – to make them fit for worship. Elsewhere in His high priestly prayer, Jesus asks His Father to sanctify His disciples in the truth. Truth is the "bath" that makes men fit for God. As Pope Benedict XVI once wrote: "The bath that cleanses us is Jesus' love to the point of death. Jesus' word is more than a word; it is His very self. His word is truth, and it is love." (BENEDICT XVI, *JESUS OF NAZARETH, VOL. 2*, SAN FRANCISCO: IGNATIUS PRESS, 2011, 60)

Jesus makes us fit for worship. This is a pure gift, but He adds: "*If I, then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done.*" It is a gift with a task. It is too easy to reduce this take to an invitation to imitate the Lord's humble service. We certainly must do that!

However, the washing of the feet is also a symbolic gesture which points to Jesus' death. The whole life of Christ is a Mystery or sacrament by which He draws near to us in order to transform us by His love and renew us from within in. By making a gift of Himself, He makes us fit for worship *and* to do His Father's works.

Of course, the true washing is that of baptism, which cleanses us from our sins. As we begin this Triduum and reflect on the Paschal Mystery, we see that the sacrifice of Calvary was anticipated already at that Last Supper when Jesus instituted the Eucharist. Yet, at Calvary, His Sacred Heart was pierced, and blood and water flowed out – the blood of redemption for the forgiveness of our sins, and water for the purification of our souls and to make of us a new creation.

By baptism, we are immersed into Christ once and for all, acquiring a new identity as one who dwells in Christ. In the life of every Christian, not to mention priest, the sacramental gift of baptism constantly requires completion – a new "washing of feet," or ongoing conversion. There is a constant need to be cleansed from the various forms of 'filth' we encounter in the world and even from spiritual worldliness, so that we may be ready to enter into divine worship.

The mercy offered by priests, not only in the celebration of the Eucharist but also in the sacrament of penance, is a tangible reminder that Jesus is continually bending down to wash our feet, to carry out His service of purifying us, of washing the dirt from our "souls"! This persistent service of Jesus is best understood as the purifying power of His love, the means by which Jesus, "*having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end*" (Jn 13:1).

This perpetual need for purification, which is at the foundation of the priesthood, is also present at the beginning of every authentic renewal of the Church. Christ seeks to renew his priests and Church through His mercy. To the priests gathered in this basilica, especially those who regularly hear confessions here, know of my gratitude for your priestly service and for that of your brother priests who are generous in washing the souls of the people of God, so that they may be holy too.

The Eucharist which was instituted immediately afterward is a continuation of that extreme mercy. *Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.* Jesus made the connection explicit in commanding the apostles to receive and drink the chalice of his blood, poured out for the remission of sins, and to do that in His memory. On Calvary the following day, he culminated his priestly sacrifice, begging the Father to forgive those for whose sins He was dying “*for they know not what they do.*”

This evening we remember the gifts of Christ’s love: the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist. I conclude with the words of Saint John Paul II who wrote of the significance of the Eucharistic sacrifice:

This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only *after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there. ... What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes “*to the end*” (cf. *Jn 13:1*), a love which knows no measure. (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, 11)