

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
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HOLY THURSDAY MASS OF THE LORD’S SUPPER
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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As we begin this Sacred Triduum, I wish to remind everyone that we are accompanied spiritually by the Holy Father, who is grateful for your prayers and for the fellowship that he has with you.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The three days’ commemoration which begins tonight really could stand “at the head of our calendar”. We heard these words in Exodus, in the Lord’s instructions to Moses and Aaron regarding the first Passover. For our Hebrew ancestors, the Passover literally did come at the beginning of the year. For us, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter are not the start of our calendar year; but this celebration of the Paschal Mystery truly is a “new beginning”. It is a new beginning, because in these three days we celebrate the mystery which has given us new life. The Eucharistic self-offering by Christ, his saving death on the cross, and his resurrection: This is the reason we live. This is the reason we have hope. It is the Passover of the Lord. And it is our Passover too: from death to life.

We talk about how Christ saved us from sin. But sin always has a specific name. It takes many different names: hatred, contempt, neglect, indifference. But one of the names of sin, which, ironically, is celebrated as a virtue in our culture, is individualism. Christ, by handing his body to his friends to be eaten on Holy Thursday, and by handing his body to his enemies to be crucified on Good Friday, has saved us from our individualism by inviting us—friends and enemies alike—into communion with his body and blood.

We speak of “communion” all the time in reference to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, whose institution we celebrate in this Mass. But sometimes we

forget the meaning of the word. We talk about “*taking* communion”. But communion is a gift to be *received!* And if it is communion, then it is never merely individual. To be Christian is to be part of a body, part of a family, part of a community.

This is what makes ideological battles over the Eucharist so inappropriate. In his own day, St. Paul spoke against divisions that were occurring in the context of the Eucharistic celebration. The meaning of the banquet of love was being lost, and the poor were being neglected. We must reject turning the celebration of the Eucharist into an ideology in our own day. This only divides what is meant to unite. It is not about “me and Jesus”. Aesthetic considerations, which have their value, must not be allowed to obscure what is most essential: that when we participate in the Eucharist, we are together receiving a gift from God that bonds us together as believers.

This was prefigured even in the language of the Old Covenant Passover. As we heard in Exodus: “You shall *share* in the lamb... with the *whole assembly* present... *all your generations* shall celebrate.” These words denote a communal sharing.

The Pope speaks of the importance of community in salvation history. He reminds us that, in coming to save us, God entered into *a people*. Christ shared his life with a community. Our Passover feast, our Eucharist, our life as Christians, is of its very essence communal. Even the Psalm speaks of this reality, when it says: “My vows to the LORD I will pay in the presence of *all his people*.”

Communion is fundamental to Christ’s work of salvation. Christ came into a world in which the first murder was brother against brother. And then, when God confronted Cain on his relationship with his brother, he denied any responsibility for him. We still do this today: every time we are indifferent to the poor, and whenever we seek to cleanse a society by getting rid of those who are inconvenient.

But that is not the way of a Christian. Our Christian life is not merely an individual concern. We come to Christ as members of a community, and we live the Gospel in community. Throughout Jesus' entire mission, he incorporated into the household of God—the divine family—those whom he had made his brothers. His life, his washing of the disciples' feet, his suffering: all of this was *gift*. All that Christ possessed was from the Father; and as the Father had given all to him, so he gave himself to others. To us.

So too, when we discover that everything we have is gift, we live as sons and daughters of God inasmuch as we give our lives to others. And the Eucharist is the “school” of this life of gift.

To make that “school” even more vivid, we participate now in the washing of the feet. In this gesture, and later in the offering on the altar, the message from God to us is the same: “As I have done, so you also should do.” In this way, we experience communion. We become a community.