

**Homily for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper
April 2, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it has long been said that the Catholic Church is renowned for her “smells and bells,” particularly with regards to her liturgy. While it certainly refers to smells such as burning incense that is used in the liturgy and to sounds such as the bells we might hear during the Consecration at Mass, the term “smells and bells” refers to a whole host of items used that engage our various senses. All of these sensory experiences are significant because they all have a symbolic meaning that invites us to enter into the action of the liturgy in a way which involves our entire being.

During the week-long span from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, we encounter many symbols which offer us an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the saving mysteries of our faith. Last Sunday, we had the symbol of the palm branches, reminding us of that triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the beginning of His Passion. At our Chrism Mass

on Tuesday, we had the sweet smell of balsam that was mixed with oil to create the Sacred Chrism which is used to consecrate people and things for sacred purposes. Tomorrow, we will have the opportunity to touch and kiss the wood of the Cross which is the instrument of our salvation. At the Easter Vigil, we will gaze upon the pillar of light as the Paschal Candle leads us into the Cathedral, signifying Christ's ultimate triumph of light over darkness in His Resurrection from the dead.

This evening, as we celebrate this Mass of the Lord's Supper, we are invited to consider some additional symbols. I would like to suggest four main symbols, symbols which lie at the heart of this night. The symbols are these: bread and wine, and basin and towel.

The mention of these four symbols should be of no surprise to you, for we know that this night focuses on the Eucharist in the forms of bread and wine and the call to service as demonstrated in the Washing of the Feet. But these symbols are worth some more reflection because of their importance to our daily lives as Catholics.

Turning first to the symbols of bread and wine, we recall that night on which Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper. In the process, He also commanded His Apostles to continue the ministry of

celebrating the Eucharist, a ministry made possible through His institution of the ministerial priesthood. This great gift of the Eucharist was given to us in order to deepen our relationship with Him.

In our first reading from the Book of Exodus, we hear the story of the Passover and how the Hebrews were instructed by God to perform a detailed ritual. Their obedience to these instructions resulted in God looking with favor upon them and sparing them from the destructive blow that the Lord would deliver to the Egyptians, thus paving the way for their escape from slavery. Every year this ritual would be repeated as a living reminder of God's saving action and how, through that action, He established the Israelites as His chosen people.

The Passover event stands out as a moment of great significance in the unfolding of salvation history in that it shows the strengthening of the communion between God and man, a communion that had been lost by our first parents in the Garden of Eden. While this communion was indeed significant, it was only a foreshadowing of the communion intended by the Lord.

At the Last Supper, Jesus makes it possible for mankind to enter into a radically more intense form of communion by consuming His Body and

His Blood in the Eucharist, through which we become partakers in His very life. Because of the remarkable blessing that this communion brings to us in our lives, Jesus desired that all should have the opportunity to share in this gift and so instructed His apostles to continue offering it until He returns at the end of time.

As we see the symbols of bread and wine brought to the altar this night, we are reminded of that night when Jesus made us His chosen people in an even more significant way by drawing us into sharing His very life through the gift of His grace communicated to us in the Holy Eucharist.

This brings us to reflect on the other two main symbols of this evening: the basin and the towel. At the Last Supper, Jesus not only invited us to share in His life, He has given us a model of how He expects us to live that life in imitation of Him. And so He gives the apostles the example of washing their feet. After completing this humble act of service, He tells them:

You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am.

If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet,

you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do (John 13:13-14).

Jesus is instructing His disciples and us that our communion with Him necessarily affects our relationship with others with whom we have communion. In his *Angelus* address for the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* last year, our Holy Father Pope Francis explained this connection in the following way:

Jesus stresses that he did not come to this world to give something, but to give himself, his life, as nourishment for all those who have faith in him. This communion of ours with the Lord commits us, his disciples, to imitate him, making of our existence, with our attitudes, bread broken for others, as the Master broke bread which is really his flesh. For us, instead, it is our generous behavior towards our neighbor which demonstrates the attitude of breaking our life for others.¹

The basin and the towel which I will use in just a few moments as I wash the feet of twelve individuals is a reminder to each of us that one of the intended effects of our regular reception of the gift of Holy

Communion in the Eucharist is to continue the life of Christ in our own life, especially as it concerns service to our neighbor.

These symbols of bread and wine and basin and towel are therefore intimately connected with one another in that they represent the summary of what it means to be a Christian disciple. They represent the two directions of communion – communion with God and communion with one another. Any attempt to explain Christianity without one of these two dimensions of communion is false. Liturgical worship in praise of God, as beautiful as it can be, without concern for the needs of the least among us is not authentic Christianity. Nor is it authentic Christianity which focuses on service to our neighbor without any attention to a worthy and reverent celebration of the liturgy. True Christian discipleship seeks to strengthen all of the bonds of communion, not just some of them.

These two dimensions of communion, the vertical communion with God and the horizontal communion with one another come together and meet in another powerful symbol that is at the heart of these days – the symbol of the Cross. It is on the Cross where the sacrifice, began at the Last Supper, is completed as Jesus offers Himself in order to reconcile the world to Himself and to one another.

Today marks the tenth anniversary of the death of St. John Paul II. This great Pope touched our lives in so many profound ways. Now, as a saint, he continues to intercede for us. Personally, I am incredibly humbled to have been appointed Bishop by this holy saint.

It was the custom of Pope John Paul II to send a Holy Thursday letter every year to priests throughout the world. In his last such letter, issued from Gemelli Hospital in Rome just a few weeks before he died, Pope John Paul the Great wrote, during the Year of the Eucharist, about the connection between the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the service that is expected of us. Pope John Paul wrote, "Christ's self-giving, which has its origin in the Trinitarian life of the God who is Love, reaches its culmination in the sacrifice of the Cross, sacramentally anticipated in the Last Supper. It is impossible to repeat the words of consecration without *feeling oneself caught up in this spiritual movement*. In a certain sense, when he says the words: 'take and eat,' the priest must learn to apply them also to himself, and to speak them with truth and generosity. If he is able to offer himself as a gift, placing himself at the disposal of the community and at the service of anyone in need, his life takes on its true meaning. This is exactly what

Jesus expected of his apostles, as the Evangelist John emphasizes in his account of the washing of the feet.”²

As we prepare once again to receive the fruits of His sacrifice of the Cross in the sacred gift of the Eucharist, let us be reminded of the great privilege of being united to Him in His Body and Blood. May we be ever mindful that our communion with Him makes us sharers in His life and so members of His Body, called to be of service to one another on our journey of discipleship toward the Promised Land of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, Angelus Address, 22 June 2014.

² Pope St. John Paul II, *Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2005*, given at Gemelli Hospital in Rome, March 13, 2005.