

**Homily for Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois  
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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

This a special day in the Christian world. As we begin the Easter Triduum, this evening's Mass of the Lord's Supper is a celebration of Christ's love. When we look at the significance of the Last Supper, we realize that Jesus instituted two sacraments that night: the Eucharist and the ordained priesthood. In the way that He instituted these sacraments and in what He said about them, we can also say that He instituted two sacraments of love at that Last Supper.

When we use the words "sacrament" and "love" in the same sentence, most people probably think of marriage, and that is fittingly so, because marriage between the baptized is a unique expression of God's love that is present in the love of husband and wife. But marriage is not the only sacrament of love.

The Eucharist is a sacrament of love because, in it, Jesus gives His very self to us. It is connected to His crucifixion because it was on the cross that Jesus poured out His love for us. It was from the cross that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It was from the cross that He altered the relationship among His followers, as He told His mother in reference to the beloved disciple John, "There is your son," and to John He said in reference to His mother, "There is your mother." In this way, Jesus created the new family of His Church, making us brothers and sisters in faith, and Mary as our Blessed Mother.

Jesus poured out His love upon His family with the blood and water that flowed from His side. The water flowing from His side symbolizes the waters of Baptism by which the Church comes into being. The blood that poured out from Him is a symbol of the Eucharist and was prefigured by the blood of the Passover lamb smeared upon the doorposts of Israel. Jesus is the new Paschal Lamb who leads us out of slavery to sin and into the freedom of God's love. As St. John Chrysostom wrote, "In those days, when the destroying angel saw the blood on the doors he did not dare to enter, so how much less will the devil approach now when he sees, not that

figurative blood on the doors, but the true blood on the lips of believers, the doors of the temple of Christ.”

The ordained priesthood is a sacrament of love because a priest shares in the eternal priesthood of the great High Priest, Jesus himself, and in this way, each and every priest dedicates his life in loving service to his spiritual brothers and sisters in the family of God. The priest’s commitment to celibacy is not a denial or refusal to love, but in fact is an expansion of love, a loving commitment to dedicate oneself in loving service of the entire community, not just a single spouse.

That is why the Church is referred to as the Bride of Christ and why the priest as *Alter Christus*, another Christ, is seen spiritually as wedded to this Bride, the Church, and is called to be ever faithful to her in love.

As Christ has loved us, so we are called to imitate that love by loving one another. That is also one of the reasons why it is so important for us to go to Mass every Sunday: if our Lord loves us enough to give of Himself in the Eucharist, how can we refuse that love? How can we not be eager to receive that love and desire to return our love to Him?

We know the saying, “actions speak louder than words.” Actions speak so strongly that they remain forever in our minds and work their

power on us. This is the case with the story we hear, the story we act out tonight. The drama of the Last Supper is full of unforgettable action, none more so than when Jesus washes His disciples' feet.

Foot washing teaches us three things: First, feet are generally unattractive. Washing each other's feet represents the power of love. It is not always easy to love one another. We allow others to love those parts of us that are not very acceptable, and we do the same for others. We are asked to love each other without qualification. We love every part of the Body of Christ.

Second, Christ asks us not to place conditions on our love. Christ loves us not because we deserve it but because He knows that we need love and He wants to give His love to us. As we receive the Holy Eucharist tonight, we see that Christ asks us to love each other fully—without reserve—and to love as he loves us, wherever that love is needed most.

Finally, we must be willing to receive Christ's love and share that love with others, without holding back. We give Him every part of ourself, asking Christ to fill us, wash us, and cleanse us of our sins. We ask Him to fill us with His love so that we may love Him and others through lives of service.

Many artists, through the years, have painted scenes from the Last Supper, and many have taken the episode of the washing of feet as their subject. A famous painting by the Victorian painter Ford Madox Brown shows a very uncomfortable Peter letting the Lord wash his feet, while the other apostles look on in amazement and shock. This action of Jesus is a complete role reversal, to their minds. Lords and masters do not do such things. Servants and slaves, yes, but surely not the Messiah! As Jesus Himself says, they do not understand.

If Jesus had merely spoken about washing the feet of others, they might have nodded their heads in agreement at “a very good thing” and then have proceeded to forget about it. But Jesus insists on getting up and doing this deed of humble service. This action speaks loudly. It shouts out. They won’t be able to forget that He did this. And that it was the last thing He taught them before He died.

The whole of Jesus’ life and ministry, from the first days in Galilee to this final night in Jerusalem, is an act of washing the feet of others. He speaks tenderly to people. He acts with justice and does not seek to offend anyone. He is patient with his enemies. Teaching us to love our enemies is the same as asking us to wash the feet of others.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI looked closely at this event of the washing of feet in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, and he makes a very telling point. We are not being asked to do the impossible. Christianity, he says, is not about being superhuman, or making extreme moral efforts. The faith is not calling us to be something that is beyond us. It is not about moral high ground, or being better than others. Jesus calls us to be more human, not less: to be our truest selves.

Jesus' washing the feet of His friends is an extravagant gesture of humility and service from the Master to His disciples. More than simply a sign of service, however, the washing of the feet is also a sign of the unifying love of Christ in the Eucharist, which leads to the second sign by which Jesus wishes to be remembered.

In the second action he takes bread in his hands and tells them, "This is my body"; and then, with the cup of wine, "This is my blood." He shares Himself, body and blood, just as tomorrow He will give Himself, body and blood, for us on the cross. His death with all its pain will be the revelation of how far God is willing to go in loving us. His disciples are called to do the same. His disciples are called to offer themselves for God's people. As they do so, they will know that Jesus is present with them.

These two gestures unite our Baptism and Confirmation with the Eucharist, evidence of Jesus' unending love for us, instituted at the Lord's Supper that we commemorate tonight. Both actions also end with a command. After washing their feet, Jesus commands His apostles, "What I have done, so you must do." After declaring that the bread and wine were His body and blood, He commands them again, "Do this in memory of me." In this way, Jesus not only instituted the Holy Eucharist, but also the ministerial priesthood. All of this is connected to Christ's command for all of us to love one another as He has loved us. Thus, Holy Thursday is also sometimes called Maundy Thursday, from the Latin word, *mandatum*, or commandment.

Our liturgy tonight will conclude with carrying the Blessed Sacrament in procession and placing it in the altar of reposition for our adoration of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist.

St. John says that Jesus loved His own right to the end. It is this persevering love to which Jesus calls us. On this special night, at this eucharistic banquet, as we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, let us allow this feast to fill our hearts with His love that never ends.

May God give us this grace. Amen.