

**Homily for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper
March 24, 2016**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in 1914, just over one hundred years ago, Private William Taylor joined the British Army at the age of 23 in order to be a part of what would become one of the deadliest wars in history. Before leaving to join the front in France, one of the theatres of World War I, he took with him a stack of eight photographs of his family. He kept the photos in a leather wallet in his chest pocket, close to his heart. His grandson recalled that “[w]hen he had quiet moments he got them out and looked at them and remembered his family back at home.”¹

This was a common practice for many soldiers, as it gave them a sense of hope and courage, remembering their loved ones with whom they hoped to be reunited after the war. In a way, one could say that these reminders served to motivate soldiers and in many cases, may have been responsible for saving them from falling into despair and just giving up in the face of such horrible conditions.

In the case of Private Taylor, those pictures did indeed have a life-saving effect, but not in a way that you might expect. While in a fierce battle which left three quarters of his regiment dead or injured, a piece of shrapnel struck him in the chest, in the exact spot where the leather wallet was resting in his pocket. The shrapnel pierced the outer layer of the wallet and the first seven pictures, but stopped before the eighth and final picture of his sister. Had that wallet and those pictures not been there, he would have likely been killed by the fragment, so we can say that those pictures literally saved his life.

There is an interesting parallel between this remarkable story from one hundred years ago with the story that we reflect on this evening from nearly two thousand years ago. That story is, of course, the Lord's Supper shared by Jesus and His closest disciples on the eve before His Passion and death.

At the beginning of the Gospel that we just heard, we have those moving words from St. John: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). Jesus knew that this would be the last time that He would be with all of His disciples before

He would offer His life on the Cross. In His great love for them, He wanted to leave them something by which they could remember Him. He did not want them to be discouraged when faced with trials or difficulty. He wanted them to think of Him and be reminded of His care for them and how He longed to be reunited with them in the glory of the Resurrection.

As a sign of His great love and power, Jesus left them with more than just a memory, like leaving a photograph which only serves to remind us of someone. Such a reminder can never take the place of having the person physically present. Jesus leaves His disciples with the wholly unique gift of the Eucharist, the gift of His Body and Blood, not just as a symbolic reminder, but as His Real Presence among them.

He was not content to limit this gift just to that one occasion, for as the Gospel says: "He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). He wanted this gift to be available to all of mankind until the end of time when He would return in glory. He makes this possible through His institution of another great gift, the gift of the ministerial priesthood through which His Real Presence continues to be with us through the sacraments, and in particular, in the Holy Eucharist.

The gift of the Holy Eucharist, therefore, is meant to evoke within each of us an awareness of Jesus' great love for each of us and His desire to remain with us for all time. Every time we come to Mass, we enter into the memorial of those sacred events. Again, this memorial is not just a symbolic remembrance, but one that makes us truly present as participants of that meal and recipients of His grace.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this understanding of memorial in the following way, drawing upon the Jewish understanding of the memorial of the Passover event of which we heard in the first reading:

In the sense of Sacred Scripture the memorial is not merely the recollection of past events but the proclamation of the mighty works wrought by God for men. In the liturgical celebration of these events, they become in a certain way present and real. This is how Israel understands its liberation from Egypt: every time Passover is celebrated, the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that they may conform their lives to them.²

The Catechism goes on to say that:

In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's

Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present.³

This notion of Christ's Passover is important for understanding the full significance of the gift of the Eucharist. The celebration of the Passover in the Old Testament recalled how God saved the lives of His chosen people, delivering them from their oppressors in Egypt. Christ's Passover, which would reach its fulfillment with His death on the Cross, is even more of a life-saving event, because His death saves us not from an earthly enemy, but from the enemy of sin, which separates us from relationship with God. The Eucharist draws us into that life-saving action by which our sins have been destroyed and we have been rescued from slavery, free to enter into the eternal promised land of Heaven.

At every Mass, just before we receive Holy Communion, the priest says the words: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." Notice that he does not say that Jesus 'took' away the sins of the world, as something that happened once in the past. He continues to take away the sins of the world through the power of the Cross, the fruits of which are made available to us each time we come to Mass.

Our celebration this evening is an opportunity for us to give profound thanks to God for this great gift. In fact, the word 'Eucharist' comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving. Every time we come to Mass, we are invited to enter into that act of thanksgiving that Jesus offered to His Father on the Cross as He died for our sins. We are thankful that His death has restored the communion with Him that had been lost through the sins of our first parents. This gift of His sacrifice has truly saved our lives, and our hearts should burn with love for Him whose love is poured into us through our reception of the gift of His Body and His Blood.

As we continue this Eucharistic celebration on this most sacred night, let us be aware of our sharing in that meal, not from a distance, but truly present with the apostles. May we be mindful of the great love Christ has for us in leaving us with this life-saving gift of His presence, so that we might have the courage never to despair when the shadow of the Cross looms large in our life, for we believe with a firm faith that His death has delivered us from all danger and His presence within us will lead us safely to the glory of the Resurrection.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Lucy Crossley, "Photos of loved ones which World War One soldier kept in his wallet in his pocket saved his LIFE by stopping shrapnel entering his body," *DailyMail*, May 15, 2014, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2629391>.

² CCC, §1363.

³ CCC, §1364.