

**Homily for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper
April 9, 2020**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We are celebrating this Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper this year on this Holy Thursday in this extraordinary manner without the physical presence of a congregation here in the Cathedral church. Nonetheless, I am grateful that you are participating through the medium of this livestreamed video, made possible by our modern technology.

The reason for this extraordinary manner of celebrating the liturgies of Holy Week and the Sacred Paschal Triduum, of course, is out of concern to act prudently during this time of the coronavirus pandemic so as guard against spreading that virus any further that it already has.

We are faced with contagious diseases all the time, like the common cold and the flu. Why is this contagious diseases being treated so differently? Frankly, because of its propensity to kill. We have voluntarily shut down our normal ways of functioning, our economy, our work, our

schools, even our modes of worship, because we do not want to see people die needlessly, if we can avoid it. Certainly we ourselves do not want to hasten our own death, if we can take steps to avoid it.

While we want to prevent anyone and even ourselves from dying if that can be prudently avoided, we all must face the reality that we will all die at some point from some cause. While that is an unpleasant reality that we would rather not think about, perhaps this threat of the coronavirus pandemic is a providential opportunity for us to reflect about and prepare more seriously for our own death, whenever that may be and however that may come about.

In that regard, then, let me ask this question to prompt your own reflection: If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, what would you want to leave behind – some word or gesture – by which your family and friends would remember you?

Jesus must have thought of this. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was “fully aware that He had come from God and was going to God, the Father who had handed everything over to Him.” He knew he was going to be killed. The opposition had grown throughout his ministry and the cleansing of the Temple was the last straw. So tonight at the Passover meal

the atmosphere is tense, but he wants to help his disciples make some sense of his death. So he performs two actions and speaks words that will interpret his coming death.

St. John tells us that Jesus wanted to show how great His love for them was. So what does Jesus do? As He and the apostles gather for the Last Supper, Jesus rises, takes off His cloak, and kneels before each of them to wash their feet like a slave. He will tell them that he no longer calls them servants, but friends, and there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. So Jesus' action points to His death.

Jesus' washing the feet of His friends is also 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, Good Friday, 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.

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.

In order to understand the full significance of the gift of the Eucharist, we must see this Paschal Triduum, these sacred three days, as Christ’s Passover. 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.

Of course, you may be thinking: all this talk about Eucharist is nice, but what about us watching at home who cannot receive Holy Communion during this time of "sheltering in place" and "social distancing"?

I have been suggesting that we see the inability to receive Holy Communion physically at this time as not just something imposed from outside, but also as something intentionally embraced as a time of spiritual fasting. The notion of fasting from Holy Communion for a time as a spiritual sacrifice was suggested in 1986 by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, when he was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In *Behold the Pierced One* (pp.97-98), he wrote:

When Augustine sensed his death approaching, he “excommunicated” himself and undertook public penance. In his last days he manifested his solidarity with the public sinners who seek for pardon and grace through the renunciation of communion. He wanted to meet his Lord in the humility of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for him who is the Righteous and Merciful One. Against the background of his sermons and writings, which are a magnificent portrayal of the mystery of the Church as communion with the Body of Christ, and as the Body of Christ itself, built up by the Eucharist, this is a profoundly arresting gesture. The more I think of it, the more it moves me to reflection. Do we not often take the reception of the Blessed Sacrament too lightly? Might not this kind of spiritual fasting be of service, or even necessary, to deepen and renew our relationship to the Body of Christ?

The ancient Church had a highly expressive practice of this kind. Since apostolic times, no doubt, the fast from the Eucharist on Good Friday was a part of the Church’s spirituality of communion. This renunciation of communion on one of the most sacred days of the Church’s year was a particularly profound way of sharing in the Lord’s Passion; it was the Bride’s mourning for the lost Bridegroom (cf. Mk 2:20).²⁴ Today too, I think, fasting from the Eucharist, really taken seriously and entered into, could be most meaningful on

carefully considered occasions, such as days of penance . . . Sometimes we need hunger, physical and spiritual hunger, if we are to come fresh to the Lord's gifts and understand the suffering of our hungering brothers. Both spiritual and physical hunger can be a vehicle of love.

Another answer to not being able to receive Holy Communion that is well-established in our Catholic tradition is the making of a spiritual communion, which is simply expressing in prayer one's longing and desire to be in communion with Our Lord. One can say such a prayer of spiritual communion in his or her own words, or use some of the beautiful prayers that have been composed by saints over the centuries.

Of course, spiritual fasting from Holy Communion, like physical fasting from food, can only be done for a while before a person must return to taking nourishment. As the threat of the coronavirus eventually recedes, we will begin looking at how and when we might be able to reintroduce the reception of Holy Communion in our parishes, while taking proper precautions to safeguard against transmitting disease. One way or another, we will again make it possible for people to be nourished by receiving the Body of Christ in Holy Communion.

In the meantime, as we continue this Holy Thursday liturgy on this most sacred night, may we be mindful of the great love Christ has for us in giving us the gifts of the Eucharist and the priesthood, 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 in our hearts will lead us safely to the glory of the Resurrection.

May God give us this grace. Amen.