

“I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” (Jn 13:51)

Brothers and sisters, God’s love for us is so great that our minds can never fully encompass it. Like sweet incense or the fragrant lily, divine love both fills our own senses and goes way beyond us, to other people, through time and space, forming the Holy Church in a common perception of God’s loving, radiant glory. Although we can and should rack our brains to think and talk about God’s love, mere rationality does not do Him justice. In order to know Him ever more deeply, He also invites us to use our imagination—through stories and gestures, through sacraments and poetry. And this is what we are doing this year again, following day by day the words and deeds of Our Lord and Savior in His Passion, till we reach the glory of Easter morn.

Tonight, Holy Thursday, the Church calls us to contemplate the beauty of *service*. And not just to *contemplate* it, but to *imitate* it. “I have given you a model to follow,” says the Lord, “so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” Jesus’ recommendation, his mandate to us, is that we follow in his footsteps. Literally and figuratively imitating him.

First, imitating Jesus literally: the Eucharist. “Do this in memory of me”: this is what we say each time we celebrate Mass, each time the entire Church, through the hands of the priest, offers up to God the Father the most holy Sacrifice of Christ’s Body and Blood. Like Christ, we take bread and wine, give thanks, bless them, break the bread and hand over to our friends the Sacrament of the Altar. We share Jesus’s story, we repeat his words and deeds, and indeed, we really receive His Blessed Body and Precious Blood, under the poor, humble forms of a little piece of flat bread and a sip of wine. Jesus *serves* His own living self to us in the Eucharist. Our minds reel that in communion, we receive the divinity of Him who creates and sustains the whole universe. How humble our God is! Always there to help us and serve us along the way home to Him. And this is the spirit in which we priests and faithful as Church must celebrate the Eucharist: the spirit of real, humble service. Let us give thanks to God today, that in the communion of our vocations, we can serve each other, as priests, as deacons, as lay faithful, bound together by the sweet ties of baptismal love.

Second, imitating Jesus figuratively: the washing of the feet. “As I have done for you, you should also do.” Tonight, once in a year, we will literally imitate Jesus’ gestures, when I kneel at the feet of twelve diverse men and women to bathe and cleanse them. But during the rest of the year, our imagination is what we use to multiply and carry out the works of charity. In America today, almost no one walks in their bare feet and needs to have them bathed. But so many folks out there and among us are weak and need our care: the unborn, the newborn, children, the elderly, the sick and the addicted, the homeless and the refugees, the hungry and

the cold, the uneducated and those who are afraid... Christ calls us to use our imagination and our senses to see and hear those who need care, and to serve them as need be. Figuratively, we wash their feet when we attend not first and foremost to our own needs, but to theirs. In Jesus, our older brother, we truly see how much God loves us as his sons and daughters. And when we realize how much our heavenly Father loves us, we also can look at those around us and see them as brothers and sisters. Serving them, then, is not a chore, nor is it a mere means of feeling good about ourselves. When we serve our spiritual siblings through creative charity, we glorify God the Father, through His beloved Son, in the Holy Spirit of Love. Serving others in charity is not first and foremost about the doing, though that is important too. Service is a state of mind, a spirit of love.

This should baffle us and keep us on our toes... and on our knees... Both serving and praying, to see how to better fulfill God's wonderful will day by day. As we marvel at Jesus tonight, crawling on all fours, cleansing and serving his friends, we are slowly but surely drawn to taste how good God is. Sadly, most of the time, we are too caught up by our own busyness to notice the amazing extent of God's love and how much it should stimulate our own love for Him, in service and sacrament. Sometimes, it takes shocking words to shake us out of being busybodies. This is why I dare share with you tonight a poem I found, written decades ago by a Dominican priest in California. His metaphors blew my mind and brought me to tears. They are not to be taken literally, but as a cry, coming through poetry from Christ, who wants us to know the depth of his love for each and every one of us, as he rises from the washing of the feet to be lifted up on the Cross, bleeding for us, always the Suffering Servant.

“Never forget,” cried God, “I am your slave!
Call me and I come.
Curse me, I cannot quit.
I have never renounced.
Do you know what I am?
I am your woman.
That is my mouth you feel on your heart,
Breathing there, warming it.
I am more. I am your dog.
That is my moan you hear in your blood,
The ache of the dog for the master.
I am your dog-woman.
I grieve a man down.
Moan till he melts.”

(William Everson, o.p., “A Frost Lay White on California”, 1957-1960)

May this shocking imagery, brothers and sisters, snap us out of our slumber. Tonight, may we realize the deeply wise craziness of God's love for us. As we follow the sacramental Jesus in procession at the end of this Mass, may we heed his tears and cries. By imagining his

sorrowful Passion and death, may we also soon feel the soft springtime breeze that blew when he rose from the dead, to love and serve. Teaching us, in all things, to love and serve.

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