

HOMILY
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HOLY THURSDAY—MASS OF THE LORD’S SUPPER
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL
APRIL 8, 2004

Monsignor LeFevre and my dear Parishioners of Blessed Sacrament Cathedral:

We gather together on this holy evening in obedience to the command of Jesus, “*Do this in memory of me...*”

These words of Jesus have many layers and levels of meaning and application. First of all, He was speaking in the precise setting of the Passover Meal, encouraging His chosen disciples to follow the tradition of their heritage by continuing to gather and share the meal of liberation. But now, they were to do so in memory of *Him*, and no longer simply in commemoration of the Exodus experience.

Note also that the command is imperative, “*Do this...*” In other words, the Holy Eucharist was intended to be an ongoing action, a *living* memorial, an *ongoing* experience. And so, we gather here this evening 2,000 years later. It is extraordinary to consider the power of those simple words of Jesus by which He was pledging to be with us as long as we invoke His presence and fulfill our side of the covenant.

As He gave the command to repeat His action of breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, Jesus was also saying something about Himself. His words were autobiographical for they truly summarized His desire that His flesh could be our daily nourishment, even as He had promised in the miracle of multiplication of the loaves.

Consider the many different centuries that this command has been heard and enfolded, and all the different cultural settings and circumstances in which believers have reflected on the Lord's promise and brought to Him their hunger. From the Aramaic spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper, to the Greek of the apostles of Asia Minor, to the Latin of ancient Rome, through the romance languages of Western Europe and the Slavic tongues of Eastern Europe, to the languages of Asia and Africa, among communities rich and poor, powerful and struggling, in times of war and peace, Christians have found consolation and strength, direction and hope by repeating the words of Jesus and gathering faithfully in His name.

These words of Jesus—“*Do this in memory of me*”—are, therefore, both a promise and a challenge, for they remind us of our call to be a Eucharistic community not only at the Lord's Table here and now, but also in the way we put this mystery into concrete action through service of neighbor. Recall that in the context of the Supper, the Lord Jesus rose from the table and washed the feet of

His disciples. Certainly, a very important part of the command of Jesus includes our call to serve the least of our brothers and sisters.

These Eucharistic words of Jesus gave rise to the gift and mystery of the priesthood, something we also celebrate tonight. As He commanded that the Eucharist be continued in His name, His words were addressed to the 12 apostles reclining with Him at the table. Implicitly, He was telling them how they were to continue living out their relationship with Him—by preaching, celebrating and serving as He had done. Just as the Holy Eucharist was pointing toward the mystery of Calvary and the one perfect sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant, the New Testament priesthood was also being announced in seminal form.

It is also significant for us to remember that the Lord spoke these words of command and promise even as He was about to be betrayed. Despite the impending denial of Peter and betrayal by Judas, Jesus loved His own until the end. He wanted them to forever treasure the fact that He gave them His very Body and Blood even when He knew full well that they would desert Him, deny Him and betray Him. In this sense, His words, “*Do this*” are also a foreshadowing of the forgiveness for which Christ was about to die. We fulfill His command when we are a community of reconciliation, healing and pardon. In a world of much violence and anger, we live the command of Jesus in the Eucharist precisely as we forgive one another, especially those who might be called our enemies.

In the mystery of this Holy Eucharist, Christ promises to be present to us, with us and for us until the end of time. And so, our memory is not only of the past but also has a future orientation of hope and confidence when all the brokenness and division of this world will be overcome in a new transformation. The Holy Eucharist, therefore, brings together in one condensed and powerful way thousands of Passover meals that have been celebrated generation to generation. We are united with the Lord Jesus and the 12 disciples as they lived the journey of Holy Thursday unto Easter Sunday, from Gethsemani to Emmaus, from the Upper Room before the Crucifixion and the Upper Room after the Resurrection.

The Eucharist truly recapitulates the whole life and work of Jesus—the mystery of Death and Resurrection. As we fulfill the command of Jesus, we come to know Him and ourselves in a new way. May we truly live the command of Jesus in every sense and every level of its meaning—“*Do this in memory of me...*”