

Homily for Holy Thursday, April 9, 2020. Christ is the Paschal Lamb

Dear brothers and sisters, the Last Supper of the Lord has far reaching significance for us. The ceremonial of Bishops sums up the liturgy of the Last Supper this way, "On this day, when Christ our paschal lamb was sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7), what had long been promised in signs and figures was at last revealed and brought to fulfillment. The true lamb replaced the symbolic lamb, and the many offerings of the past gave way to the single sacrifice of Christ."¹

Our Holy Mother the Church and the spotless Bride of Christ explains this further, "By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning."² Our Lord's passing over to the Father via the cross and resurrection which is the new Passover is anticipated and celebrated in the Eucharist. This in turn fulfils the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of heaven.

The first reading from Exodus 12:1-14 takes us back to the first Passover. God commanded the Israelites to slaughter the Passover Lamb, eat its flesh and apply its blood at the entrances of their houses. This was the night of deliverance of the people from 430 years of slavery (Exodus 12:41). The Lord said, "For on this ... night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn in the land, human being and beast alike, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt - I, the LORD! But for you the

¹ Ceremonial of Bishops.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church 1340. Hence forth to be written as CCC #

blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thereby, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you" (Exodus 12: 13-14). So that the significance of this night might be ever fresh in the minds of his people, the Lord said, "This month shall stand at the head of your calendar; you shall reckon it the first month of the year" (Exodus 12:1). The Passover is the dawn of a new beginning. The month of Abib when ripe grains are harvested became very important because that is when the Passover is celebrated. It usually falls near the vernal equinox, March-April. This month of Passover is also known by the "Babylonian name of Nisan" (Cf. Nehemiah 2:1; Est 3:7). Now, let us ponder the key event of the Passover of the Jews - the slaughtering of an unblemished lamb.

The similarities between the Passover Lamb and Christ are unmistakable: The Passover Lamb was an unblemished male. Christ came as a man, he was without sin. Even Pontius Pilate, a pagan governor, established this, saying, "I find no guilt in him" (John 18:38). The immediate context however was Pilate's declaration that our Lord was not guilty of any crime. This corroborated the prophecy made many years earlier through the prophet Isaiah, "He had done no wrong, nor was deceit found in his mouth" (Isaiah 53:9). Moreover, the bones of our Blessed Lord and that of the Passover Lamb, were not broken. They remained intact. Regarding the bones of the Passover Lamb, God commanded, "You shall not break any of its bones" (Exodus 12:46). Likewise, in the case of Christ, "When the soldiers came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs" (John 19:33). The lamb was slaughtered during the twilight. Christ died on the cross at the same hour - 3:00 p.m., the hour of mercy. The death of the Lamb led to the deliverance of the

Israelites, the death of Christ brought redemption for God's people. Jesus was sacrificed to free men and women from the bondage of sin. "Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Dear brothers and sisters, we can confidently say that the Passover lamb symbolizes Christ. The event of the first Passover was fulfilled in our Lord. Jesus laid down his life for our redemption. Through the Eucharist, his body and blood on our lips keep the devil at bay. In the last Supper, he anticipated in an un-bloody manner his passing over to the Father by laying down his life on the cross. Three times He had spoken about his death and resurrection. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day" (Matthew 20:18-19, 16:21, 17:22-23). He took on this mission head on. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

Saint Melito of Sardis, a second century bishop of Sardis captures the greatness of the sacrifice of our Lord in these words, "For the sake of suffering humanity he came down from heaven to earth, clothed himself in that humanity in the Virgin's womb, and was born a man. Having then a body capable of suffering, he took the pain of fallen man upon himself; he triumphed over the diseases of soul and body that were its cause, and by his Spirit, which was incapable of dying, he dealt man's destroyer, death, a fatal blow."³

³ St Melito of Sardis, The Lamb that was slain delivered us from death and restored us to life, in the Office of Readings of Holy Thursday.

Jesus is the One who brought us out from slavery into freedom, from darkness into light, from death into life, from tyranny into an eternal kingdom; he made us a new priesthood, a people chosen to be his own for ever. He is the Passover that is our salvation. It is he who endured every kind of suffering in all those who foreshadowed him. In Abel he was slain, in Isaac bound, in Jacob exiled, in Joseph sold, in Moses exposed to die. He was sacrificed in the Passover lamb, persecuted in David, dishonored in the prophets.⁴

Why did our Lord go the whole gamut of laying down his life? The Gospel today tells us, it is love unto the end. He loves those who are his own in the world and loves them to the end (John 13:2). He begins by washing the feet of his Apostles before the Last Supper signifying that the new family he is establishing is by love and service. "He who is both God and man makes man fit for God. Man cannot make himself fit for God. Purity is a gift."⁵

He commands us to do what he did at the last Supper. Do this in memory of me. What does this mean? "The command of Jesus to repeat his actions and words "until he comes" does not only ask us to remember Jesus and what he did. This is directed at the liturgical

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth Part Two* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), p.60-61.

celebration, by the apostles and their successors, of the memorial of Christ, of his life, of his death, of his Resurrection, and of his intercession in the presence of the Father.”⁶

This is how our vocation as priests and bishops was born and the holy Eucharist instituted. These happened in the upper room of the Last Supper. Are we able to follow his example and obey his command? Yes! "We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast to our profession of faith. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, we have one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet he never sinned. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and favor and to find help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16). In the same Letter to the Hebrews, the Scripture assures us, "One does not take this honor on his own initiative, but only when called by God as Aaron was (Hebrews 5:5-6).

From the beginning the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command. Of the Church of Jerusalem it is written: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts. ⁷.

⁶ CCC 1341.

⁷ CCC 1342

Explaining this further, the Fathers teach,

It was above all on "the first day of the week," Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, that the Christians met "to break bread." From that time on down to our own day the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued. Today, we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure. It remains the center of the Church's life.⁸

How can we repay the Lord for his goodness to us? The Psalmist spoke of this movingly, "How can I repay the LORD for all the great good done for me? I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people (Psalm 116:13-14). The invitation to attend Mass in this cannot be missed. This is made clear further in the Psalm, "To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the LORD"(Psalm 116:17).

It is therefore necessary that we prepare our minds and hearts before we come to the Mass. Receive him not as a casual thing or because everybody is doing it but with great reverence and purity of heart. "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:29). Didache one of the earliest Christian documents after the Bible says, "Whoever is holy, let him approach; whoever is not,

⁸ CCC 1342

let him repent. *Marantha. Amen.*”⁹ As we receive the Holy Eucharist in purity of heart each time we come to Mass, we must be ready to provide the same food we received to others. In what way? St Augustine inspired by God reminds us that this is what God is telling us in the book of Proverb when says, "If you sit down to eat at the table of a ruler, observe carefully what is set before you; then stretch out your hand, knowing that you must provide the same kind of meal yourself" (Proverb 23:1, 8). Does this mean that we are going to give our bodies and blood to others to eat and drink? No, it means that we shall love others as our Lord loves us. Following the examples of the saints and our good ancestors, we can do this by feeding the hungry, counseling the doubtful, clothing the naked, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, comforting the afflicted, forgiving offenses, bearing wrongs patiently, praying for the living and the dead.

In a supreme act of love, our Lord gave us himself as our Passover Lamb. The Scripture put this clearly, As Christ laid down his life for us, so we too ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. We should indeed love one another as he loved us (1John 3:16).

⁹ (Didache,10,6). *Marantha*, means come Lord.