

EUCHARIST: OUR DELIVERANCE FROM THE POWER OF DEATH AND DEVIL

Dear brothers and sisters,

Two pillars of the Holy Thursday Liturgy are the Masses of the Chrism and the Last Supper. However, in most Dioceses around the world, pastoral reasons make it pertinent and possible to celebrate the Chrism Mass on another day. For instance, in our Diocese of Memphis TN, it is celebrated on Tuesday. Be that as it may. The Chrism Mass speaks of the anointing from the Holy Spirit which makes one a priest and enables him to perform priestly duties. Being one in whom the fullness of God dwells, Christ Jesus is the Anointed One and the Eternal High Priest. "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly..." (Isaiah 61:1). No one is a priest without the anointing that comes from the Spirit of Jesus.

The Mass of the Lord's Supper emphasizes the institution of the Holy Eucharist. On this Day in 33 A.D our Lord instituted the Holy Eucharist and also the New Testament Priesthood to perpetuate the fruit of the Eucharist for all ages.

For today's homily we concentrate on the Eucharist: Our deliverance from the Power of Death and Devil. We hear the echoes of the Eucharist in all of today's readings. "Our Blessing cup is a communion with the blood of Christ" (1 Cor 10: 16). "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1Corinthians 11:26). On that night that our Lord instituted the Eucharist, he was at the last Supper with his Apostles celebrating the Passover. Fulfilling the plan of salvation, our LORD instituted this august Sacrament of love and redemption in a totally unforeseen way. "He took bread, said the blessing,

broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, Take and eat; this is my body. Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). With these and actions he instituted the Eucharist and also ordained his Apostles priests. He empowered them to continue the Eucharist sacrifice and thereby extend the work of redemption throughout all ages. "Do this in memory of me" (Luke 22:19). "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1Corinthians 11:26).

What meaning does this have for us? The Eucharist is the source, summit, the fountain and the heart of our salvation, the sacrament of our redemption. Through the prophets, the Lord spoke many times about the salvation he will bring in terms of deliverance of his people from all that robs them of life.

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, To announce a year of favor from GOD and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn; To place on those who mourn in Zion a diadem instead of ashes, To give them the oil of gladness in place of mourning, a glorious mantle instead of a listless spirit. You yourselves shall be named priests of the LORD, ministers of our God shall you be called. I will give them their recompense faithfully, a lasting covenant I will make with them" (Isaiah 61:1-3, 6). This is what our Lord fulfilled in the Eucharist instituted in the course of the Passover meal.

To understand the wonder the Lord did for us, we go back in time to a country in Africa called Egypt. The people of God lived in this country for 430 years. Towards the end of that period the Egyptians oppressed and

enslaved them. God did not hesitate to save them. Just as a parent would intervene to rescue his child being bullied by vicious and overpowering siblings. The first reading from Exodus 12 tells how the Lord did this. The climactic moment of deliverance came when the Passover Lamb was slaughtered and eaten, and the blood of the Lamb was put on the door lintels of the houses of his people. So, when the slaying angel entered the land of Egypt, he passed over the houses of God's people sparing their lives while destroying all the first born of man and beast of the oppressors of God's people. Egyptians were also God's people, but they sinned grievously by worshipping creatures rather than the creator and oppressing and enslaving fellow human beings. God executed judgement on them and all the animals they worshipped. At the same time, he led his people out of the land of oppression to the land of freedom. The exodus was a prefiguration of the redemptive work of Christ, celebrated in the Mass.

You can see the similarities between the Passover Lamb and Christ. Both are without spot or blemish. Both are blameless. Both were killed at the same three o'clock hour, twilight, the hour of mercy. Their blood kept the angel of death at bay. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb saved the children of Israel from death, the blood of Christ saves us from eternal death. St Melito of Sardis put it succinctly, "Christ was led forth like a lamb; he was slaughtered like a sheep. He ransomed us from our servitude to the world, as he had ransomed Israel from the land of Egypt; he freed us from our slavery to the devil, as he had freed Israel from the hand of Pharaoh. He sealed our souls with his own Spirit, and the members of our body with his own blood" (St Melito of Sardis, Easter Homily, the Lamb that was slain has delivered us from death and given us life, Office of the Reading Holy Thursday). It is on this basis the Bible says, Christ is our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7). He is the One who covered death with shame and cast the devil into mourning, as Moses cast Pharaoh into mourning. He is the One who smote sin and robbed iniquity of offspring. He is the One who brought us out of slavery into freedom, out of darkness into light, out of death into life, out of tyranny into an eternal kingdom, who made us a new

priesthood, a people chosen to be his own forever' (Ibidem). Our lot would have been an eternal death if not because of what Christ did for us.

The deliverance of the oppressed people from their oppressors foreshadowed Christ's deliverance of the whole creation from the bondage and dominion of death and the devil. This is why the Mass matters. We are not at play when we are at the Eucharist. It is a reenactment of the sacrifice of our redemption. It is not just a nice meaningless function where we are entertained or jazzed up. This is a matter of life and death. This is a heaven on earth.

What does this ask of you? You should not indulge in anything that could trivialize the Mass. You must not take away from it. May the Mass commit you to great reverence and gratitude to God who gave you himself with his own hand. The Lord washed our soiled feet. He took our filth and guilt away. Pope Benedict XVI put it so movingly, "He divests himself of divine splendor; he, as it were, kneels down before us; he washes and dries our soiled feet, in order to make us fit to sit at the table for God's wedding feast. It is Jesus' love to the end that cleanses and washes us" (Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two, Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection, p.57.) He died our death and restored our life. May the Mass commit you all to help the poor and the oppressed. Above all, do not forget that the holy Eucharist is Jesus truly, really and substantially present. Do not absent yourself from Mass or treat it as of secondary importance. I know that fear of covid could deter or scare you from attending the Mass but do not surrender to that. Do something about it. For the Mass the Eucharist is our deliverance from the power of death and devil. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and i will raise him on the last day" (John 6:54).