

“Our Vocation: God’s Gift to Help Us Fulfill His Son’s Dying Wish”

Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper

March 24, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Introduction

When did Jesus found the Church? The answer would seem to be obvious: at Pentecost. Certainly the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and Mary and the other disciples in that upper room marked a new beginning, “the birth of the Church,” as we are accustomed to saying.

The Complexity of the Church

And yet, there is more to it than that. The Church is a multi-faceted reality, so much so that no singular event within the mystery of the Lord’s saving Passion, death and glorification can define the Church in her totality.

Yes, Pentecost is always the reference point. The Spirit descending in the form of tongues of fire teaches us the essence of the very reason for the Church’s existence: to go forth into the world boldly and with ardor to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to *all* peoples, to be a people of God that embraces all races and languages.

In the Gospel of St. John, though, we read that Jesus breathed the Spirit upon the Apostles during his first appearance to them after the Resurrection. The breath of the Spirit expresses the new life we have in Christ, harkening back to God blowing the breath of life into Adam at the creation of the human race. And this new life comes to us by way of forgiveness: Jesus handed his Spirit over to the Apostles for the forgiveness of sins. The Apostles, remember, are the first community of the Church, the pillars of the Church. Christ, then, establishes the Church to be a messenger of mercy, to be the means through which we receive his forgiveness for our sins.

The Mandatum

Tonight our focus is on the first event in the narrative of the Lord’s Passion, death and Resurrection: the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Does not this, too, speak to a founding moment of the Church? As the theologians tell us, the Eucharist makes the Church; the Most Holy Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church’s life, it at one and the same time expresses the unity of her members and builds up that unity among them in Christ.

The Last Supper narrative which the Church designates for this Mass of Holy Thursday, though, comes from the Gospel of St. John, which is marked by the fact that it does not mention Christ actually instituting the Eucharist. Or, at least, not in the same way that the other Gospels do. John’s narrative is distinguished by his account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. This, too, he tells them to do in memory of him – he just

uses different words to say the same thing: “as I have done for you, you should also do.” In fact, the traditional name for this day in the English language, Maundy Thursday, come from this commandment of the Lord – *mandatum* in Latin – his mandate to us to continue his memory on earth by doing for each other what he has done for us.

Corporate Identity

It is the awareness of this high calling, this ethos, which imbues and permeates everything about the Church. Every community has some defining moment of history, or principle, or value, that animates it, that defines it as a community and is the permeating ethos that animates the self-understanding and instinctual awareness of its members.

For our Jewish ancestors in the faith, that moment came with the institution of the Passover feast, which we heard about in our first reading. This, for them, was the defining moment of their identity, when God revealed to them who He really was for them: a liberating God, who delivers them from slavery into freedom, who protects them against their powerful enemies, and, even when He must bring them low because of their transgressions, forgives and restores them. And so the Jewish people to this day, many thousands of years later, continue to keep the annual Passover feast.

What God revealed to one chosen race long ago He has opened up to all to put their faith in Him and follow in His way. To them He grants true freedom, delivering them from the shackles of sin and death to the light of faith and living in the true freedom of the children of God. This is what St. Paul tells us he “received from the Lord” and “handed on” to us. This, in other words, is what defines our identity as Christians, and what we mean by “tradition”: handing on our identity to others, so that they might know what the Lord Jesus has done for them, and left as a memorial, so that they could do likewise for others.

The Mandate of our Vocation

To do likewise for others: no, this does not mean that we endure the exact same suffering as the Savior did for us, much less that we could be the Savior ourselves. Rather, it means imitating his example of humble service – he bowed low and removed his outer garment to wash his disciples’ feet – but each one according to his or her own vocation and state in life. This is the mandate he gave us the night before he died – to us, to the entire Church, not just a select few clergy and religious.

This, indeed, is the very purpose of a vocation. We all have a common Christian vocation to imitate the example of our Lord and so bear witness to the Good News in word and deed. But each of us has a personal vocation, a vocation that God has individually tailored to each one of us, so that this high calling might be brought down into concrete reality. By persevering in our vocation, in the place and time in which God

has put us, fulfilling its demands and meeting its challenges, we fulfill the Lord's mandate: doing in memory of him what he did in memory of us.

Conclusion

It is customary in this Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper to portray this mandate that each of us has received from the Lord by carrying out the ritual of the washing of feet. And so, for the washing of feet this evening we will have representatives from different vocations and states in life, as a reminder to us that our vocation is the gift God gives us as our way of fulfilling His Son's dying wish, the mandate he gave to his Apostles at the Last Supper and to every Christian since: "do this in memory of me."