

4. 9. 20 (Holy Thursday)

Today we begin the Holy Triduum of Holy Week. I could not find the word *triduum* in Webster's New Word College Dictionary, but on Google Search its definition is "a period of three days of prayer usually preceding a Roman Catholic feast." Those of us who know a little Latin or French or Spanish could have figured this out for ourselves. The word is a combination of two Latin words, the word for three (*tres, tria*) and the word for day (*dies*). So the mystery is solved. Today is the first of the three days, the Triduum, which prepare us to celebrate the Lord's resurrection on Easter Sunday.

This Triduum places us in a story, that of the last three days of the Lord's life. Today we commemorate his gathering with his disciples for what will turn out to be his last meal with them. Tomorrow, Friday, we will accompany him through his trial and crucifixion. Then on Saturday we will wait for his resurrection, beginning its celebration in the evening and continuing it on Sunday. Clearly, the moods of these three days differ greatly. Friday can be nothing but grief and compassion for the suffering and dying Jesus, while Saturday and Sunday are filled with joy at his birth from death into new life.

Today, Holy Thursday, we are with Jesus and his disciples at his “Last Supper” with them. This is the fourth time this week that we read about our Lord present at a meal. On Monday of Holy Week we read about his having supper at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. On Tuesday we read about his last supper with his disciples and focused in on Judas’ plan to betray him and on his warning to Peter that he too would betray him. Yesterday, Wednesday, we were again at this same last supper, but as it is described in Matthew’s Gospel, not in John’s Gospel, as on the previous day, and the focus was again on Judas, indeed exclusively on Judas and his intended betrayal of Jesus. Now, on Thursday, we are at the same meal once again, and again this time as it is described in John’s Gospel. And John now tells us about Jesus’ washing his disciples’ feet. That is the exclusive focus of today’s Gospel. However, sometimes today, Holy Thursday, is called Maundy Thursday because Jesus now gives his disciples a new commandment, that is, in Latin, a *mandatum*. This word comes a little later in this same chapter, after the washing of the feet. Jesus then says to them: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). We have here the gesture, the washing of the feet, and then its interpretation. It is a service, and a service which expresses love, the new commandment.

That is the Gospel message for Holy Thursday. But Holy Thursday is also traditionally celebrated as the institution of the priesthood in the Catholic Church, and also as the day on which the bishop of the diocese consecrates the oils which will be used in the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, ordination and the anointing of the sick, although this blessing of the oils is often moved to an earlier day in the week so that priests, occupied on Thursday with the celebration of the liturgy, can attend.

This joining of the theme of service with that of the priesthood is indeed fitting, for the priesthood exists to serve the community. But these are hard days for the priesthood in our church. People, both in and outside the Catholic Church, cannot see a priest without asking themselves whether he may have abused a child. And some priests cannot appear in public without thinking that this is how people are looking at them. It will take another fifty years or so, or perhaps more, before this reality begins to fade from view. And yet those of us who are priests can recall the “romance” of the priesthood. Our hands were anointed with holy oil and then tied together to symbolize how holy they should be since they would handle sacred realities, especially the body and blood of the Lord. It was also the custom for a priest to save the cloth used to

bind his hands together and bind his mother's hands with it at her death so that she could appear before God as the mother of a priest. "Oh," some would say, "just a lot of sugary nothings." But such things mean a lot to the people who have taken part in them.