



# The Holy See

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## MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

*HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

*Basilica of St John Lateran*

*Holy Thursday, 5 April 2012*

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

Holy Thursday is not only the day of the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist, whose splendour bathes all else and in some ways draws it to itself. To Holy Thursday also belongs the dark night of the Mount of Olives, to which Jesus goes with his disciples; the solitude and abandonment of Jesus, who in prayer goes forth to encounter the darkness of death; the betrayal of Judas, Jesus' arrest and his denial by Peter; his indictment before the Sanhedrin and his being handed over to the Gentiles, to Pilate. Let us try at this hour to understand more deeply something of these events, for in them the mystery of our redemption takes place.

Jesus goes forth into the night. Night signifies lack of communication, a situation where people do not see one another. It is a symbol of incomprehension, of the obscuring of truth. It is the place where evil, which has to hide before the light, can grow. Jesus himself is light and truth, communication, purity and goodness. He enters into the night. Night is ultimately a symbol of death, the definitive loss of fellowship and life. Jesus enters into the night in order to overcome it and to inaugurate the new Day of God in the history of humanity.

On the way, he sang with his Apostles Israel's psalms of liberation and redemption, which evoked the first Passover in Egypt, the night of liberation. Now he goes, as was his custom, to pray in solitude and, as Son, to speak with the Father. But, unusually, he wants to have close to him three disciples: Peter, James and John. These are the three who had experienced his Transfiguration – when the light of God's glory shone through his human figure – and had seen him standing

between the Law and the Prophets, between Moses and Elijah. They had heard him speaking to both of them about his “exodus” to Jerusalem. Jesus’ exodus to Jerusalem – how mysterious are these words! Israel’s exodus from Egypt had been the event of escape and liberation for God’s People. What would be the form taken by the exodus of Jesus, in whom the meaning of that historic drama was to be definitively fulfilled? The disciples were now witnessing the first stage of that exodus – the utter abasement which was nonetheless the essential step of the going forth to the freedom and new life which was the goal of the exodus. The disciples, whom Jesus wanted to have close to him as an element of human support in that hour of extreme distress, quickly fell asleep. Yet they heard some fragments of the words of Jesus’ prayer and they witnessed his way of acting. Both were deeply impressed on their hearts and they transmitted them to Christians for all time. Jesus called God “Abba”. The word means – as they add – “Father”. Yet it is not the usual form of the word “father”, but rather a children’s word – an affectionate name which one would not have dared to use in speaking to God. It is the language of the one who is truly a “child”, the Son of the Father, the one who is conscious of being in communion with God, in deepest union with him.

If we ask ourselves what is most characteristic of the figure of Jesus in the Gospels, we have to say that it is his relationship with God. He is constantly in communion with God. Being with the Father is the core of his personality. Through Christ we know God truly. “No one has ever seen God”, says Saint John. The one “who is close to the Father’s heart ... has made him known” (1:18). Now we know God as he truly is. He is Father, and this in an absolute goodness to which we can entrust ourselves. The evangelist Mark, who has preserved the memories of Saint Peter, relates that Jesus, after calling God “Abba”, went on to say: “Everything is possible for you. You can do all things” (cf. 14:36). The one who is Goodness is at the same time Power; he is all-powerful. Power is goodness and goodness is power. We can learn this trust from Jesus’ prayer on the Mount of Olives.

Before reflecting on the content of Jesus’ petition, we must still consider what the evangelists tell us about Jesus’ posture during his prayer. Matthew and Mark tell us that he “threw himself on the ground” (Mt 26:39; cf. Mk 14:35), thus assuming a posture of complete submission, as is preserved in the Roman liturgy of Good Friday. Luke, on the other hand, tells us that Jesus prayed on his knees. In the Acts of the Apostles, he speaks of the saints praying on their knees: Stephen during his stoning, Peter at the raising of someone who had died, Paul on his way to martyrdom. In this way Luke has sketched a brief history of prayer on one’s knees in the early Church. Christians, in kneeling, enter into Jesus’ prayer on the Mount of Olives. When menaced by the power of evil, as they kneel, they are upright before the world, while as sons and daughters, they kneel before the Father. Before God’s glory we Christians kneel and acknowledge his divinity; by this posture we also express our confidence that he will prevail.

Jesus struggles with the Father. He struggles with himself. And he struggles for us. He experiences anguish before the power of death. First and foremost this is simply the dread natural

to every living creature in the face of death. In Jesus, however, something more is at work. His gaze peers deeper, into the nights of evil. He sees the filthy flood of all the lies and all the disgrace which he will encounter in that chalice from which he must drink. His is the dread of one who is completely pure and holy as he sees the entire flood of this world's evil bursting upon him. He also sees me, and he prays for me. This moment of Jesus' mortal anguish is thus an essential part of the process of redemption. Consequently, the Letter to the Hebrews describes the struggle of Jesus on the Mount of Olives as a priestly event. In this prayer of Jesus, pervaded by mortal anguish, the Lord performs the office of a priest: he takes upon himself the sins of humanity, of us all, and he brings us before the Father.

Lastly, we must also pay attention to the content of Jesus' prayer on the Mount of Olives. Jesus says: "Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want" (Mk 14:36). The natural will of the man Jesus recoils in fear before the enormity of the matter. He asks to be spared. Yet as the Son, he places this human will into the Father's will: not I, but you. In this way he transformed the stance of Adam, the primordial human sin, and thus heals humanity. The stance of Adam was: not what you, O God, have desired; rather, I myself want to be a god. This pride is the real essence of sin. We think we are free and truly ourselves only if we follow our own will. God appears as the opposite of our freedom. We need to be free of him – so we think – and only then will we be free. This is the fundamental rebellion present throughout history and the fundamental lie which perverts life. When human beings set themselves against God, they set themselves against the truth of their own being and consequently do not become free, but alienated from themselves. We are free only if we stand in the truth of our being, if we are united to God. Then we become truly "like God" – not by resisting God, eliminating him, or denying him. In his anguished prayer on the Mount of Olives, Jesus resolved the false opposition between obedience and freedom, and opened the path to freedom. Let us ask the Lord to draw us into this "yes" to God's will, and in this way to make us truly free. Amen.

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