



The Holy See

MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Basilica of St John Lateran

Holy Thursday, 9 April 1998

1. "*Verbum caro, panem verum / Verbo carnem efficit...*". "*Word made flesh, the bread of nature, / by his word to flesh he turns; / Wine into his blood he changes; / What though sense no change discerns?*". These poetic expressions of Thomas Aquinas vividly summarize today's evening liturgy "*in Cena Domini*", the Mass of the Lord's Supper, and help us enter into the heart of the mystery we are celebrating. In the Gospel we read: "*Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end*" (Jn 13:1). Today is the day when we recall the institution of the Eucharist, a gift and inexhaustible source of love. Engraved and rooted in it is the new commandment: "*Mandatum novum do vobis...*": "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another*" (Jn 13:34). 2. Love reaches its peak in the gift the person makes of himself, without reserve, to God and to his brothers and sisters. By washing the Apostles' feet, the Teacher presents them with an example of service: "*You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet*" (Jn 13:13-14). By this act, Jesus reveals a distinctive feature of his mission: "*I am among you as one who serves*" (Lk 22:27). Thus a true disciple of Christ can only be someone who "*takes part*" in Christ's actions, making himself, as he was, prompt in serving others even with personal sacrifice. Indeed, service, that is, caring for our neighbour's needs, is the essence of any well-ordered authority: to reign is to serve. The priestly ministry, whose institution we celebrate and venerate today, implies an attitude of humble availability, especially to those most in need. Only in this light can we fully understand the Last Supper, which we are commemorating. 3. Holy Thursday is described in the liturgy as "*the day of the Eucharist*", in memory of the day when "*Jesus Christ, our Lord, gave the mystery of his body and blood for his disciples to celebrate*" (Roman Canon for Holy Thursday). Before being sacrificed on the Cross on Good Friday, he instituted the sacrament which perpetuates this offering in every age. In every holy Mass, the Church commemorates that decisive historical event. With a deep sense of awe the priest bows at the altar over the Eucharistic gifts, saying the very words spoken by Christ "*on the night he was betrayed*". Over the bread he says, "*This is my body which will be given up for you*" (cf. 1 Cor 11:24) and then, over the cup of wine: "*This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant*" (cf. 1 Cor 11:25). Since that Holy Thursday almost 2,000 years ago until this evening, Holy Thursday 1998, the Church has lived on the Eucharist, letting herself be moulded by the Eucharist and continuing to celebrate it while she awaits the second coming of her

Lord. This evening, let us make our own St Augustine's invitation: O most beloved Church "*manduca vitam, bibe vitam: habebis vitam, et integra est vita*!": "*eat life, drink life: you will have life and it will remain intact!*" (Homily 131, I, 1).⁴

"*Pange, lingua, gloriosi / Corporis mysterium / Sanguisque pretiosi...*". We adore this "*mysterium fidei*", by which the Church is ceaselessly nourished. May the vibrant, awesome sense of the supreme gift which the Eucharist is for us be reawakened in our hearts. And may our gratitude be rekindled, linked to recognition that there is nothing in us that was not given to us by the Father of all mercies (cf. 2 Cor 1:3). The Eucharist, the great "*mystery of faith*", remains primarily and above all *a gift*, something we have "*received*". St Paul reasserts this, introducing the narrative of the Last Supper with these words: "*I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you*" (1 Cor 11:23). The Church has received it from Christ and in celebrating this sacrament gives thanks to the heavenly Father for what he has done for us through Jesus, his Son. In every celebration of the Eucharist, we welcome this gift which is always new; we let his divine power pervade our hearts and enable us to proclaim the Lord's death as we await his coming. "*Mysterium fidei*", the priest sings after the consecration and the faithful respond: "*Mortem tuam annuntiamus Domine ...*": "We announce your death, Lord Jesus, we proclaim your Resurrection until you come in glory". The whole of the Church's paschal faith is contained in the Eucharist. This evening we also give thanks to the Lord who instituted this great sacrament. We celebrate and receive it in order to find in it the strength to advance on the way of life, awaiting the day of the Lord. Then we will also be brought into the dwelling where Christ the High Priest entered through the sacrifice of his Body and his Blood.⁵

"*Ave verum corpus, natum de Maria Virgine*": "*Hail true body, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary*", the Church prays today. While we are "*waiting for his coming*", may we be accompanied by Mary, from whom Jesus took his body, the same body which this evening we share fraternally at the Eucharistic banquet. "*Esto nobis praegustatum mortis in examine*": "*May we be granted to have a foretaste of you at the decisive moment of death*". Yes, take us by the hand, O Eucharistic Jesus, at that supreme moment when you will bring us into the light of your eternity: "*O Iesu dulcis! O Iesu pie! O Iesu, fili Mariae!*". © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana