

Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper – Holy Thursday – March 29, 2018 – Fr. Bryan Jerabek
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 7:00pm – 1,400 words

With this solemn observance of Holy Thursday we again take our place as spectators at the Last Supper, contemplating its deeper meaning with the eyes of faith and the attentiveness of our hearts. The sequence of tonight's Mass mirrors what happened on that first Holy Thursday: soon we will re-enact the washing of the feet, reflecting upon the commandment of charity and service. Then, gifts of bread and wine will be brought forward; our Bishop, who represents Christ to us, will take them and make present Christ's sacrifice, using our Lord's words from the Last Supper. All who are properly disposed will then draw near to receive their portion of the sacrifice – communion with our God and Lord himself.

But what does it mean to be “properly disposed” to receive Holy Communion? The gospel of this Mass helps us to grasp that concept more fully. Jesus girds himself with a towel and kneels to wash the disciples' feet. Our feet literally connect us to this earth; physically speaking, they are what “grounds us”. And the ground upon which we walk is not always clean: our feet do get dirty. Spiritually, there is also a certain “dirt” or “filth” we acquire as we go through life in this world; we are all too familiar with the reality of sin, and we know that while some sins are more serious than others, all sins affect our relationship with our Creator. Because of our sin, when we say the words of the centurion at Mass, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof”, we truly mean it. We know it: we are not worthy!

How, then, do we become worthy? We ask the Lord to do in us what we are unable to do for ourselves: “but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed”. Only he can make us worthy to commune with him. The washing of the feet in the gospel spiritually represents this fact to us. It is Christ who washes us! But think again of his discourse with Peter: once Peter realizes that it is a good thing, he wants Christ to wash his whole body. But Jesus replies, “Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over”. St. Augustine, commenting on this passage, saw the connection with baptism: when we are baptized, we are cleansed through and through. But then, on our journey through life on this earth after baptism, our “feet”, as it were, get dirty: we pick up the grime and dust of sin. So there is a need for additional washings; baptism cannot be repeated, but confession washes away the grime that we accrue.¹

The Church teaches us that to be worthy to receive the Lord in Holy Communion, we must be in the state of grace.² That is, we must have God's life in our soul. That life is first given to us at baptism. Venial sins – those smaller sins we commit – weaken that life within us, but do not extinguish it; thus, it is not strictly necessary to confess venial sins, for God graciously forgives them in other ways. But mortal sins do extinguish God's life in us. Each and every mortal sin that we commit snuffs out the flame of God's love in our hearts. The soul that is in the state of mortal sin is unworthy of God: no amount of good that such a person does has any value if he or she is not right with the Lord. We cannot work our way into heaven – we cannot be saved apart from God's grace!³ That is why it is so important for us to go to confession as soon as we are aware of being guilty of mortal sin: so that we may be forgiven, so that we may indeed be washed, so that God may restore his supernatural life to our souls and make us worthy of himself.

To receive communion in the state of mortal sin would be to commit another mortal sin; more than that, it would be a sacrilege, for it is an offense against Christ himself. If we have not been washed clean, we are unworthy to approach the Lord's table. Pope Francis, speaking just

¹ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Gospel of John, Chapter 13, Lectio 2.

² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1415.

³ Cf. Ephesians 2:8.

two weeks ago on this very topic at his Wednesday catechesis, said, “We know that one who has committed a mortal sin should not approach Holy Communion without having first received absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation. May this Lent be an occasion to receive that sacrament, confessing well and [then] encountering Christ in Holy Communion.”⁴ So we learned in our catechism about the “Easter duty” – that of confessing our mortal sins in number and kind at least once a year in preparation to receive Holy Communion at Easter or during the Easter season.⁵ That duty is a bare minimum, for the Church really wants us to receive Holy Communion often – if not daily, then at least weekly. But let us never approach in an unworthy manner!

When we receive communion worthily – in the state of grace – a wonderful thing occurs. That intimate encounter with Christ strengthens his grace – God’s very life – in our souls, causing us to grow in holiness. It increases his charity within us, so that the good that we do has an even greater value in God’s sight. It impels us to do the good works that are the fruit of faith. And it is a pledge for us of the future glory that we hope to share in, for in heaven we will have perfect communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – a unity not mediated through a sacrament, as now, but experienced directly and most perfectly, with faith giving way to sight.⁶ What we witness at each Mass is all covered with a veil, as it were: if only we could see it, we would not believe our eyes! Faith gives us access to it, but it so easy for us to take it for granted or fall into routine; indeed, some even lose their faith and simply go through motions.

It is possible for us to be spiritually present at the Last Supper this night and at every Holy Mass because of the ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons. In instituting the sacrament of his body and blood on that first Holy Thursday, Christ also established the sacrament of holy orders, which gives the means for perpetuating his sacrifice down through the ages until he returns in glory. Bishops are the direct successors of the Twelve, whose feet Christ washed at the Last Supper; priests are the coworkers of the bishops, cooperating in the ministry of Christ the head. Bishops and priests are thus able to wash the feet, so to speak, of all who approach the Lord’s table, to make them worthy to share in the fruit of the sacrifice, cleansing them of any and all mortal sin. They do this first through baptism, and then, as often as is needed, through confession. Deacons assist bishops and priests in their ministry and model Christ’s service for us all. And all of us, fortified by God’s grace and having communed with God at his altar, are then called to go out into the world to extend Christ’s presence and share his charity with all.

How good the Lord has been to us, in giving us the means to be washed over and over again, as often as we need it, as we trod the winding paths of life in this world! This Holy Thursday, we ask the Lord to grant us the grace of having a greater appreciation of his gifts, particularly those of the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist. May he also strengthen our resolve to live our faith more fully, doing the works that are its fruit. It is Christ himself who makes us worthy; it is Christ who gives us the strength to do the good that he desires. On behalf of Bishop Baker, Bishop-Emeritus Foley, and all of the priests and deacons of our diocese, I thank you for your prayers for us and for your goodness and generosity in responding to God’s call. May we each fulfill our God-given roles worthily and well, so that we may all rejoice to be reunited around the banquet of the Lamb in heaven.

⁴ Pope Francis, Wednesday Audience of 14 March 2018, remarks (given in Italian) to the Polish community present; my translation. See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180314_udienza-generale.html.

⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2042.

⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1323.