

Reflection for Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday)

This is a Holy Week like no other, all of the ceremonies are taking place but behind closed doors. The liturgical life of the Church continues but the faithful are unable to participate. This is a sad, even distressing time for many of us who take this week seriously. We can watch the ceremonies on TV or online but it's not the same as being there in person. Even if you do watch the Mass today, the Mass of the Lord's Supper, you will notice that the optional elements, for example the washing of the feet, the procession to the altar of repose, have been removed.

The Church provides for only one Mass to be celebrated today, in the evening, when we celebrate two essential elements of our Catholic faith; the Institution of the Eucharist (the Mass) and the Sacred Priesthood. The Mass depends on the priesthood and vice versa and Our Lord wanted to establish both before he was put to death on the cross, So on the night before he died He took bread into His holy and venerable hands, and with eyes raised to heaven He gave thanks, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to His disciples saying, 'Take this all of you and eat of it, for this is My body, which will be given up for you.' In a similar way, He took the precious chalice in His holy and venerable hands, and once more giving thanks, He said the blessing and gave the chalice to His disciples saying, 'Take this all of you and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.' Then, Jesus issues a command to the Apostles, 'Do this in memory of me,' and we have been doing this in memory of Jesus ever since, for over two thousand years, without a break. In fact there is Mass offered somewhere in the world every minute of every day.

It is important to remember that only a validly ordained priest can offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, no-one else can do this. There are many places in the world where faithful Catholics have to wait for years for a priest to turn up and offer Mass. This is unfortunate and regrettable but unavoidable. It's also important to understand the difference between a service of the Word and Holy Communion and the Mass. I always have to make this clear when I go into the school for a service of Holy Communion when I remind the children that the sacred hosts have been consecrated at Mass in the church before I arrive.

The Mass is so much more than a service of Holy Communion. It is the re-enactment of the sacrifice of Our Lord on the cross of Calvary when He offered Himself to God the Father for the forgiveness of sins. It is the Mystery of Faith, a mystery which we will never fully understand. The death of Jesus on the cross and in particular the shedding of His blood restored our relationship with God and opened the gates of heaven. But the Mass is also a heavenly banquet, the supper of the Lord, a foretaste of the happiness we will experience when we are taken up to be with God for ever. This is why, just before we receive Holy Communion, the priest says, 'Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world, blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lord.' Then we express our unworthiness in the words of the centurion as we say, 'Lord I am not worthy to receive you under my roof but only say the word and my soul will be healed.'

Let's hope and pray that it won't be too long before we take an active role in our Liturgies again and be physically present for the Mass. As good as it is to watch Mass it's not the same as the real thing. To be a Christian is to be part of a community of believers with whom we can share and nurture our faith and support one another in the Lord.