

+ MAUNDY THURSDAY: IN CENA DOMINI

April 13, 2017

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My very dear sons,

In a real way it was the Lord's own feet that would have needed attention during the Last Supper, even more than those of the Apostles. Not that Jesus' feet were somehow impure, but because they were about to be cruelly pierced by nails. They needed no cleaning, but they needed anointing. However, as we know, Mary, the sister of Martha, whom tradition identifies with Mary Madeleine, had thought about this matter earlier. It happened six days before the Pasch in Bethany.

Jesus therefore, six days before the Pasch, came to Bethania, where Lazarus had been dead, whom Jesus raised to life. And they made him a supper there: and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that were at table with him. Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of right spikenard, of great price, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Then one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, he that was about to betray him, said: Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

Now he said this, continues the Evangelist, not because he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and having the purse, carried the things that were put therein. Jesus therefore said: Let her alone, that she may keep it against the day of my burial. For the poor you have always with you; but me you have not always.¹

Indeed, often enough the question of the poor is exploited for reasons other than charity. But the Lord, who was the very poorest of all, could not be fooled by this sort of deception. His Sacred Heart and mind were bent on what would really matter for rich and poor alike, the great work that He came into the world to accomplish. Mary, sister of Martha understood what Judas, the infinitely sad one, did not comprehend. What feet are those she anoints! The one who is sometimes called "the fifth evangelist," Isaiah, indicates this with prophetic insight from afar.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, and that preacheth peace: of him that sheweth forth good, that preacheth salvation, that saith to Sion: Thy God shall reign!²

Although some of them would later undergo themselves the pain of crucifixion, having their own feet nailed to a wooden post—Peter and Andrew in particular—on the terrible night we are commemorating the Apostles were not ready for this; they were not yet prepared to have their feet pierced. It was enough for the moment that they have them washed by the Lord as an illustration of the great commandment Christ was about to give them as a summary of the moral message of the Gospel.

A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another.³

¹ Jn 12: 1-8.

² Isaiah 52:7.

³ John 13:34.

And so it was that the Lord of Heaven and earth, putting on an apron, the garment of service to others, performed what was usually the service performed by slaves, washing one by one the feet of those he would now no longer called servants but friends. After all, as Jesus had taught them, “[T]he Son of man also is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as redemption for many.”⁴

With such lessons on so solemn occasion, one would think that these men, who had benefitted so long from the teaching of the Word made flesh, the very Son of God come down to earth to dwell among men—one would think they would “get it.” It could be expected that they would readily and intelligently enter into the mind of their Master and walk bravely after Him into the Passion without falling away.

Peter saith to him: Why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thee.⁵

Sadly, Peter the one called the “Rock” was going to become like sand in the events to follow. One day Peter would lay down his life for his Master, but he still had to go through the school of the Passion. As with the other Apostles, his feet would carry him away this night to safety when the mob came to arrest Jesus.

One might also expect the Christian world in general to be characterized by the willingness to serve, by the fraternal charity of people who have been given a share in God’s own love. We have been mediating on these things for two thousand years! How the Muslims and people of other religious persuasions are scandalized by the greed and selfishness they see all too often in the Christian West! The Hindu Mahatma Gandhi said that he liked our Christ but not our Christians: sadly enough he knew all too well what he was talking about. Of course, these non-Christians have their human weaknesses too—and in great abundance. They too must deplore scandals and lamentable examples. In fact there is really no abyss so deep as that of human sin and misery, except that of Divine Mercy, as reflected in the pierced hands and feet of Jesus. That is a far different sort of abyss: one that stretches upward.

Let us follow therefore once more this night and tomorrow the Savior in His Most Sorrowful Passion. It is the great school of real-life moral Philosophy and Theology, the combat school of virtue, particularly of Charity. Let us stand with the Blessed Virgin Mary at the foot of the Cross, where we will see with the eyes of faith the end of a dark world and the mysterious promise of a new one, flowing out from the wounded side of Our Lord in the water and blood, above those cruelly pierced and divine feet. Amen.

⁴ Mk 10:45.

⁵ Jn. 13:37.