

+ MAUNDY THURSDAY: IN CENA DOMINI

April 18, 2019

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.

Before the festival day of the pasch, Jesus knowing that his hour was come, that he should pass out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them unto the end.¹

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My Very Dear Sons,

How do we grasp something of the mystery, seemingly impenetrable, of Maundy Thursday, of this night so unlike all others, when troubling things are coming to a head, to a climax that the Apostles and Disciples themselves do not fathom? There is light here, no doubt, for example in the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist--the reason why the liturgical vestments are white--and in the sublime words the Savior pronounces during His great Discourse of farewell in Saint John. There is spiritual brightness to be sure, but there is also much obscurity. There is darkness in the betrayal of Judas, now an open matter after his departure from the Upper Room, and more generally there is the sense of a foreboding that flows from many words of Jesus:

All you shall be scandalized in me this night. For it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be dispersed.²

As sometimes happened in the past, Christ shows himself particularly severe with the head of the Apostles, Saint Peter, and the ever bolder claims the latter makes.

Peter saith to him: ...I will lay down my life for thee. Jesus answered him: Wilt thou lay down thy life for me? Amen, amen I say to thee, the cock shall not crow, till thou deny me thrice.³

In fact, on this eve of His sorrowful Passion and of the impending consummation of His entire life's work as Word-Incarnate upon the gibbet tree of Calvary, the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples gathered in the Upper Room a new depth of the whole mystery, a lesson of "love unto the end." Here we have the first principle of the truest Philosophy. To begin with, God Himself bending over to accomplish a menial task in the washing of the feet. In so doing, He neither shuns the demeaning nature of the work, nor relinquishes His majesty as God, as Master of the Universe. Noble actions are rare enough but not unknown in the human story; nor is the spectacle of the lowly services performed by those who find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder a novelty. The striking thing is to see the two aspects united in one Person, to see the King of kings performing the task of a slave. The Zeus of the Greeks lived in splendid isolation on Mount Olympus, but this God-Man dwells among simple men and the poor of Palestine.

It is true that the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of a remarkable figure, a "servant of God," who would be both glorious ("Behold my servant shall...be exalted, and extolled, and shall be exceeding high"⁴) and yet rejected, taking upon himself ignominious sufferings:

¹ John 13:1.

² Matthew 26:31.

³ John 13: 37-38.

⁴ Isaiah 52:13.

“Despised, and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity...”⁵ But this Servant of Yahveh had not appeared before the coming of Christ. What is enacted in the Upper Room and then in the Garden of Gethsemane is new—new and frankly disturbing to men whose faith is not yet affirmed. The beautiful face of Jesus of Nazareth will turn into the disfigured and sorrowful mask of the Man of Sorrows, the Holy Face, covered with blood and blasphemy. What a dark road He travels tonight!

He loved them to the end. But we see this is no common path He walks. One must step back in order to get even a clue. Here, in the Upper Room of Holy Thursday, we have the beginning of the main act of a drama begun in eternity. God being “He who is,”⁶ the infinite act of being itself, is also Truth itself and very Love. The characteristic of love, or of what in philosophical terms we might call the Good, is to give of itself, *bonum diffusivum sui*. Being infinitely happy in Himself and infinitely good, God wanted to give. He could not give or create another God (though He is three Persons in one God), but He could and did create a world, and it was “good” as the book of Genesis tells us, or “beautiful” as we read in the Greek version. Then, because we human creatures endowed with free will fell into sin, He, again out of pure love and goodness, not from any necessity but with entire freedom, decided to redeem the fallen human race, and this, not by the easiest available means, a simple “fiat,” but through the Incarnation of the His Son and the redemptive suffering of that same Incarnate Word of God. And here we are at the Passion of the Christ, the moment when all is to be accomplished.

The Church too is a mystery of love. As Pope Francis recently stated:

Love is without limits. Without it, the Church cannot move forward; the Church cannot breathe. Without love, she cannot grow, and is transformed into an empty institution, made up of appearances and actions without fecundity.⁷

Things have not been well however with the bride of Christ, the Church. In a book that will soon appear in English, Cardinal Sarah affirms that the Church is going through a great crisis. And he puts the matter rather bluntly:

I believe firmly that the situation that we are going through at present in the Church resembles in all points Good Friday, when the Apostles abandoned Christ, whom Judas betrayed, because the traitor had wished for a Christ according to his ideas, a Christ preoccupied with political questions....A number of priests and bishops today are literally bewitched by political and social questions.⁸

Elaborating on this point the good Cardinal explains that

...there always have been betrayals in the Church. [But] today, I do not fear to state that priests, bishops, and even cardinals are afraid to proclaim what God teaches and to transmit the doctrine of the Church. These clergymen are afraid to be disapproved of, to be seen as reactionaries. That is why they say vague and imprecise things in order to avoid any criticism, and they embrace the foolish trends of the world. This adaptation is a betrayal.

So let us do what we can to bring at least the candle light of our prayers to this gloom. Already in the terrible night the first rays of a great dawn will appear. As we keep watch and follow the Savior through the dark hours of the Triduum, let us keep Hope for that dawn to come; let us be the Church in the best sense, ever adoring God in spirit and in truth. Amen.

⁵ Ibid. 53:3.

⁶ Exodus 3:14.

⁷ Pope Francis, homily, April 26, 2018.

⁸ Cardinal Sarah, *Le Soir Approche et Deja le Soir Baisse*.