

✠ MAUNDY THURSDAY: IN CENA DOMINI

April 6, 2023

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 (Jn 13:1).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My very dear sons,

The verse just quoted, taken from the Gospel according to Saint John, says it all. The entire mystery of Maundy Thursday is contained as if in a spiritual seed in these few words: the washing of the feet, the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist, Christ's painful awareness of Judas' betrayal, and the beginning of the Passion. It is all there. "He loved them until the end," that is to say, to the utmost, until the last moment, until His human physical and spiritual strength were exhausted, until the end of the world, this world that is in time and has a beginning and an end. God is love, Saint John teaches us elsewhere (I Jn 4:16). God is not just loving but love itself, love that is transcendent, divine, perfect, love that goes all the way. This divine love shines forth as never before in the person of the Messiah at the moment of the Passion.

It was no easy matter to express such a love in a few gestures, but Our Lord, in His divine wisdom, managed to accomplish just that. The ominous signs that begin to accumulate around the life of the Savior at this supreme moment and the physical darkness itself only underline the luminous reality of God's love made manifest in the soon-to-be-crucified Jesus. It all points to the same thing, clearly, forcefully, unambiguously. But the Apostles, these men destined to be the pillars of the Church, have no clue at this moment. They are in the dark, without understanding. Saint John, the contemplative, the one closest to the Master during the Last Supper, sees in this darkness more than the others, but he too will realize the full meaning of it all only later.

Are we also in the dark? Let us try at least to understand something.

First of all, this mystery of Maundy Thursday is about preparing for a world that is beyond our own. This goes against everything that is typical of our age. One of the great masters of modern thought and opponents of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche, put it negatively this way.

Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue. Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth. Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let them fly away from earthly things and beat with their wings against eternal walls. Alas, there has always been so much virtue that has flown away. Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do—back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.

If the Gospel means anything, it means the exact opposite of what Nietzsche suggests. Christ is leading us precisely to "eternal walls," to the luminous and timeless fortifications of the heavenly Jerusalem, of the City of God far greater than Rome or the earthly Jerusalem. To turn back upon ourselves and our mortal bodies, destined for the grave, is to lock ourselves into the earthly city of despair, the earthly existence that must

perish. Maundy Thursday is about Hope. The Holy Eucharist is our bread of eternal Life, our supernatural and supersubstantial bread of the Angels.

Our modern societies are adopting on an ever-increasing scale the logic of Nietzsche and abandoning the logic of Christ. This is why these false values and the Church are presently on a collision course in America—or, perhaps, the collision has already occurred. We followers of the suffering Messiah are heading for Heaven; the other philosophy is heading for earth alone—or even for Hell.

A second great intuition that enlightens the scene in the Upper Room is the coming to earth at this moment of God's Infinite Mercy. But this is deeper than any ocean. This is where we need God to lift up our hearts and minds to the height of the mystery.

First of all, what Our Lord is about to accomplish is the very real and efficacious redemption of mankind. He is going to redeem us, that is to say, "buy us back" from slavery to Satan; He is going to "satisfy" for our sins, make atonement, reparation. He is going to expiate the sins of our fallen race. So, is this about justice or about mercy, a matter of law or of love?

Some Christians refuse any idea of justice, holding that it is wrong even to mention such a thing, where God has come to make us sharers in the great wealth of His mercy. This is true in a way, but when we read Saint Paul in particular we realize that it was precisely in His Infinite *Mercy* that God deigned also to satisfy in all *justice* for us. In other words, He could have simply granted amnesty to the human race, letting us begin again as if sin had never happened. But He had a grander plan, one worthy of His divine nature. He sent His own Son to pay the price of justice for us, so that the debt of sin would strictly be "repaid." Saint Thomas Aquinas explains this point:

That man should be delivered by Christ's Passion was in keeping with both His mercy and His justice. With His justice, because by His Passion Christ made satisfaction for the sin of the human race...and with His mercy, for since man himself could not satisfy for the sin of all human nature...God gave him His Son to satisfy for him...And this came of more copious mercy than if He had forgiven sins without satisfaction. (III, q. 46, art. 1, ad 3m)

It is all a bit hard to fathom. One way to understand is by returning to the vocabulary of the Bible, a language that is perfectly luminous in its sublime poetry. We are looking for an image here. There is surely no more expressive and telling image in the whole Bible than that of the Lamb. The lamb was one of the animals that were sacrificed on the altar in the Temple of Jerusalem. It was the lamb that was eaten at Passover, when the Hebrews left Egypt. The blood of the paschal lamb was painted on the door posts of each house so as to protect the inhabitants from the Angel of Death that was to pass over Egypt. Jesus is, in the fullness of time, the true Lamb of God, who takes the place of the animals and makes an efficacious sacrifice. He will be on the Cross erected over Golgotha, both the Priest and the victim of this definitive sacrifice: the unique Lamb that takes away the sins of the world, the highest most perfect expression of the Mercy of God.

The Lamb of God brings mercy to the human race, but by means of His sacrifice that stands at the crossroads of History as the greatest single sign of the goodness of God our Father in Heaven. So, together in spirit with Our Lady of Sorrows and the Apostles, let us follow this Lamb of God through the stages of His most sorrowful Passion, by fasting, keeping watch and prayer from the heart. What better thing is there to do? Unlike the earthbound Nietzsche we are destined for a Kingdom of Light that lies beyond our horizons. Unlike those who know nothing of Divine Mercy, we are the followers of the Lamb, a people of Hope. Amen.

