

Holy Thursday

(Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 / 1 Cor. 11:23-26 / John 13:1-15)

01.04.2021

On this Holy Thursday evening, as we enter into the Sacred Triduum, I hear as if resonating in my mind and heart two Latin antiphons – one of which is an antiphon we took at this morning's celebration of the Divine Office; the other, an antiphon we sing for the feast of an Apostle. The first (this morning's antiphon) is *Oblatus est ipse qui voluit*. Those are words from the prophet Isaiah. A rough translation of the text would be: *He offered Himself, He the One who freely willed to do so*. The second (the antiphon sung on the feasts of apostles) is *Majorem caritatem nemo habet, ut animam suam ponat quia pro amicis suis*. Those are words from John's Gospel, Jesus' own words: *There is no greater love than this, to give one's life for one's friends*. What we celebrate this evening is Christ's freely-willed self-offering: the gift He made of His life out of love for His disciples (and for all) whom He called His friends.

Celebrating the Eucharist, we are not to remain as if on the outside looking in, if I can put it that way, rather, we are called to well and truly enter into the mystery of Christ's love that we commemorate here. We could say that what we are called to do this evening is to espouse Christ's movement of self-giving love; to make an offering of our lives, as generously as Jesus made an offering of His. To well and truly celebrate Eucharist is to become an oblation. It is to present oneself to God, to offer one's life to Him... as Jesus did: for others! The oblation we make is not just the presentation of bread and wine, but the gift of *all that we have and all that we are*. To *celebrate Eucharist* should lead us to *become Eucharist!* It should conform us to Christ in His self-giving love. As a Eucharistic People we are called to like the Lord; indeed, to be one with Him. To become Eucharist is to become *bread broken and shared for the life of the world*; it is to become the cup of blessing out-poured: a cup of *reconciling, forgiving love* shared with others.

The first Apostolic Exhortation Pope Benedict XVI produced was entitled *Sacramentum Caritatis. The Sacrament of Love*. That Letter was born out of a Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist. It spoke of the Eucharist as *the gift Christ-Jesus makes of Himself, in which He reveals God's infinite love for every man and woman*. The thing to grasp is that Jesus' offering (what we celebrate in Eucharist) is not just for Christians, not just for the Church community, but for the whole of humanity... *every man and woman*. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Benedict stressed the sense of wonder – the sense of amazement – the Eucharistic Mystery should awaken in our hearts. I would say that this sense of wonder or amazement should lead us to aspire to become one with Christ in what the Sacrament signifies. It should inspire us to become a reflection of Christ's own self-gift in His supreme act of love! The title of the Apostolic Exhortation insisted upon the fact that the Eucharist is essentially *a Mystery of Love*. I would say, a *mystery of love lived*; a *mystery of love made flesh!* The implications of this should be clear for us. When we say *Amen* as we hear the words *The Body of Christ*, what we are saying to the Lord is this: *I am Your body. I am Yours. Here I am. I give myself to You to do with me as it pleases You*. Jesus' Prayer in Gethsemane which we will remember in the Hour of Watching after this celebration comes to mind. What Jesus declared on that night of agony when He said, *Not My will, but Thy will be done*, amounts to Him having said to His Father: *Do with me as it pleases You*.

To have a Eucharistic spirituality is not just about loving to participate at Eucharist celebrations: *loving to attend Mass*, as some people would say. To have a Eucharistic

spirituality is also about more than *finding comfort in praying in the presence of the Reserved Sacrament: doing adoration*, as others would say. A true Eucharistic spirituality will embrace the whole of life.

It has surely been a great challenge for many people during the present pandemic to have been, as they see it, deprived of the possibility of attending Eucharist and receiving Holy Communion and in some places to have been unable to engage in Eucharistic adoration, because church buildings were closed. Some would claim that this *robbed them of the possibility of living their Eucharistic spirituality*. I am not sure that vision of things is correct. A Eucharistic spirituality can be lived even when access to the Lord's Table is just not possible. I was struck these past days during our refectory reading here at the abbey to listen to how the saintly Charles de Foucauld (who had such a strong Eucharistic spirituality) went for months on end without being able to celebrate Eucharist and/or to have had the privilege of periods of adoration. (At the time Church law obliged a priest to have at least one server and for the Blessed Sacrament to be exposed there had to be more than one person present.) Indeed, at one stage Charles de Foucauld was even deprived from having the comfort of reserving the Sacrament in his hermitage – and this despite the fact that he was a priest. Strikingly, it was precisely around that time that Charles de Foucauld wrote of how he saw himself to be fulfilling his priestly ministry by being a presence to the people of Algeria among whom he lived: the Muslim population of the place. While unable to share the Eucharist with those around him, Charles de Foucauld was the sacrament of Christ's presence to the people ... by his life given freely out of love for them! Charles de Foucauld's solidarity with those around him was his way of expressing what the Eucharist signifies, what it is all about: communion... Holy Communion!

I find Charles de Foucauld's testimony to be very relevant for all of us at the present time. His example shows us that being unable to attend the Sacred Liturgy can be a way of becoming/being Eucharist for others – including people who might never have had, or never will avail of, access to the Eucharistic Table. What Christians have accepted to live – voluntarily offered to live – during the pandemic, for the well-being of society as a whole, is an eloquent testimony to their solidarity with all people; a way of living the mystery of compassion and of communion with suffering humanity! It is a reminder to all of us that there are other ways of being in communion with the Lord than by receiving the bread and wine consecrated in a liturgical celebration. To freely accept to sacrifice oneself for the good of others – quite literally, for the life and well-being of others – can and should be seen is a grace and a blessing at this particular time in the world's history, rather than a privation of one's rights, as some people, mounted on their high horse, are claiming. What some Christians can forget – what we can all forget – is that we can have a right and choose not to exercise it... making that choice for the very best reason: for the common good! Christ is our model when it comes to voluntarily giving up our rights for the good of others. Jesus would have had *every right to cling to His equality with God*, but He chose not to... out of love. *Christ sacrificed Himself for others* – for all of us! *Christ gave His life for us*. When we are asked to deprive ourselves of something for a period we can feel affronted. Christ simply accepted to do so. *Christ humbled Himself; He emptied Himself*.

We will be reminded of what I am inclined to call *Jesus' inner posture* over and over again during all these days. At the liturgy each day of the Triduum we will sing the words of Philippians 2 in that beautiful chant *Christus factus est. Christ made Himself obedient even unto death*. The value of our witness as Churches to have voluntarily refrained from gathering for communal worship, as we would like to have done, during the present pandemic should not be underestimated. The Eucharist truly celebrated, truly lived, culminates in the joyful and convincing testimony of a life consistent with Christ's example. It is in this way that the Lord calls us to be His witnesses. Union with Christ should lead us further still than

just living in communion with fellow-Christians, those to whom Christ also gives Himself in the sacramental signs of bread and wine. It should lead us to be in union with all those for whom Christ offered His life: and that was the whole of humanity! This means that no one should be excluded from our self-offering. No one is a stranger to the gift we make of our lives when we are animated by Christ's own universal love! As we gather here this evening, let us be careful not to be focused only upon what we live within the walls of this church building with like-minded people who share our values. The Church should not consider itself to be or allow itself to become a *holy huddle*. We are called to open our minds and widen our hearts to the vast dimensions of the world all around us – a world in which so many fail to recognise or understand the meaning of the Mystery we celebrate, but who can, however, comprehend and recognise the sense of what we do for them when we sacrifice ourselves for their sake by way of self-giving love! If, as many like to say, what is experienced at the Eucharist is the *Real Presence*, let us remember that what really makes the Divine present everywhere in this world is love. The traditional chant to accompany the Washing of the Feet – a gesture we will forego to safeguard people's well-being at this time – has us sing: *Ubi Caritas est vera, Deus ibi est. Where true charity and love are, there God is present*. If we refrain from carrying out the ritual *Mandatum* (the Lord's Commandment) in this evening's celebration, it is precisely because of what the commandment is all about: love... servant love!

The Wisdom writer tells us: *There is a time for everything: There is a time for doing things and a time for refraining from doing them*. St Paul tells us: *Whatever we do or say must be done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*. Let us accept what we have not been able to do and can still not do – much as we would like to do it – can also be *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...* that's to say, *in the name of love*. For, Christ is nothing other than the revelation of the love of the Father for the whole of humanity.

Amen!