

Holy Thursday

The Eucharist, a perpetual sign of God's love

ECCLESIA

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**Saint John
Paul II**



1. *"In supremae nocte Cenae / recumbens cum fratribus . . . On the night of that Last Supper, / seated with his chosen band . . ., / Then as food for his apostles / gives himself with his own hand."*

With these words, the moving hymn *"Pange Lingua"* presents the Last Supper, at which Jesus left us the marvellous Sacrament of his Body and Blood. The readings which have

just been proclaimed illustrate its profound meaning. They form a kind of triptych: they present the institution of the Eucharist, its prefiguration in the Paschal lamb, and its existential representation in brotherly love and service.

It is the Apostle Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, who reminds us of what Jesus did “on the night when he was betrayed”. To the historical account Paul has added his own commentary: “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). The Apostle’s message is clear: the community that celebrates the Lord’s Supper makes his Passover present. The Eucharist is not simply the memorial of a past rite but the living representation of the Saviour’s supreme gesture. From this experience the Christian community cannot but be moved to become the prophetic voice of the new creation inaugurated at Easter. Contemplating this evening the mystery of love that the Last Supper puts before us once again, we too remain in absorbed and silent adoration.

2. “*Verbum caro, / panem verum verbo carnem efficit . . .* Word made Flesh, the bread of nature / By his word to Flesh he turns.”

This is the wonder which we priests touch every day with our hands during Holy Mass! The Church continues to repeat Jesus’ words and knows that she must do so until the end of the world. By virtue of those words a marvellous change takes place: the Eucharistic species remain, but the bread and wine become, in the felicitous expression of the Council of Trent, “truly, really and substantially” the Body and Blood of the Lord.

The mind feels lost before such a sublime mystery. Many queries arise in the hearts of believers, who nonetheless find peace in Christ’s words. “*Et si sensus deficit / ad firmandum cor sincerum sola fides sufficit* – Faith, for all defects supplying / where the feeble senses fail.” Sustained by this faith, by the light which illumines our steps even in the night of doubt and difficulty, we can proclaim: “*Tantum ergo Sacramentum / veneremur cernui* – Down in adoration falling / Lo, the sacred host we hail.”

3. The institution of the Eucharist is connected to the Passover rite of the first Covenant, which has been described for us in the passage from Exodus just proclaimed: it speaks of the lamb “without blemish, a male a year old” (Ex 12:6), the sacrifice of which would save the people from the coming slaughter. “The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you” (12:13).

The hymn of Saint Thomas comments: “*Et antiquum documentum / novo cedat ritui* – Lo!

O'er ancient forms departing, / Newer rites of grace prevail". It is right then that the Biblical readings of this evening's Liturgy should point our gaze towards the new Lamb, who by his blood freely shed on the Cross has established a new and definitive Covenant. Thus the Eucharist, the sacramental presence of the sacrificed body and the spilt blood of the new Lamb! In the Eucharist salvation and love are offered to all mankind. How could we not be fascinated by this mystery? Let us make our own the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas: "*Praestet fides supplementum / sensuum defectui* – Faith for all defects supplying / Where the feeble senses fail". Yes, faith leads us to wonder and adoration!

4. It is at this point that our gaze takes in the third element of the triptych that makes up today's liturgy. This we owe to the account of the Evangelist John, who depicts for us the marvellous icon of the washing of feet. By this action Jesus reminds his disciples in every age that they must bear witness to the Eucharist in loving service to others. We have heard the words of the Divine Master: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14). It is a new style of life that springs from Jesus' deed: "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15).

The washing of feet is intended to be an exemplary act, which in Christ's death on the Cross and in his Resurrection has its interpretative key and fullest explanation. In this act of humble service the Church's faith sees the natural consequence of every Eucharistic celebration. Genuine participation in the Mass cannot but produce fraternal love in the individual believer and in the whole ecclesial community.

5. "He loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). The Eucharist is the permanent sign of God's love, the love that sustains our journey to full communion with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. This is a love that surpasses the human heart. As we pause this evening to adore the Blessed Sacrament, and as we meditate on the mystery of the Last Supper, we feel immersed in the ocean of love that flows from God's heart. With grateful minds, let us make our own the hymn of thanksgiving of the people which has been redeemed:

"Genitori Genitoque / laus et iubilatio ... To the Everlasting Father, / and the Son who reigns on high, / With the Holy Spirit proceeding / Forth from each eternally, / Be salvation, honour, blessing, / Might and endless majesty." Amen!