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Implied in our reception of the Eucharist is a responsibility to work for social justice.

# The Holy Thursday Liturgy: Our Prayer Leads to Living Out Justice

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## THE FOUR QUESTIONS

During the Passover celebration (referenced in the First Reading [Exodus 12:1–8, 11–14] on the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper) a dramatic moment occurs during the dinner when the youngest child asks, “Why is this night different from all others?” The child has rehearsed all year to make this query in Hebrew. Everyone holds their breath as they await this question since the rest of the meal and its narrative hinges on these few words. The preliminary question turns into a second, a third, and then a fourth question. The queries that follow are: “Why on this night do we dip vegetables twice? Why on this night do we eat only unleavened bread? Why on this night do we eat many kinds of vegetables, including bitter ones? Why on this night do we recline at table?” Once these questions are posed, the celebration begins.

The four questions have been an integral part of the celebration of Passover for thousands of years. The repetition of these questions from year to year passes the story of God’s relationship and wondrous deeds with the Chosen People to the next generation.

Catholics, also gathered in the springtime of the year for the celebration of the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, do again what they have done in previous years. As they gather, they may ponder the question “Why is this night different from all others?” That question can be followed by others:

- On this night why do we gather to break from the one bread and drink from the one cup?
- On this night why are feet washed?
- On this night why do we process with the Blessed Sacrament out of the Church?

## Why is this night different from all other nights?

First of all, why is it important that we gather at night after sundown? The time of day of the observance is significant; Jesus gathered in the evening with his followers to celebrate the Passover. With the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, the faithful enter into the Sacred Paschal Triduum. Lent has ended and a three-day observance of the greatest mysteries of our redemption has begun.

But how does our paschal celebration differ from last year? Or the year previous? Although circumstances change from year to year, the liturgy at the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper remains constant. The faithful gather for a sacramental meal to which other elements, such as the washing of feet and the procession for the Transfer of the Most Blessed Sacrament, are appended. Through the liturgy, the faithful respond to three commands: to love one another, to do this in memory of Jesus, and to do as Jesus did when he washed the feet of his disciples.



Through the footwashing ritual, Christians are called deeper into a life of service.

## On this night why do we gather to break from the one bread and drink from the one cup?

In participating in the liturgical action with bread and wine, we are following Jesus' command, "Do this in memory of me," words that the faithful pray with the priest during the Eucharistic Prayer. What makes tonight's celebration different from what we do each Sunday? Other than the addition of a few ritual elements, such as the washing of feet and the procession at the Transfer of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the basic shape of this liturgy is recognized as that of all other Eucharistic celebrations. The additional elements in the liturgy deepen our sense that this bread that we share and this common cup are food for our journey, food that strengthens us to go out and serve. Throughout the year, the dying are brought Viaticum, emphasizing food for the *via*, the way. The rest of the faithful also long for sustenance along their way that they might live out their discipleship. The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins just after the washing of feet, linking our lives of service in the world with the consecrated bread that we eat. If the gap between liturgy and just living starts to close, the celebration will have truly transformed us.

Examining the command to "do this," we may ponder what those words encompass. The Church interprets the phrase to mean, at the least, the consecration of the bread and wine. On this night, when feet are washed, our understanding of "do this" expands to mean giving our life to serve others.

## On this night why are feet washed?

Only during the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper does the priest kneel to wash the feet of the faithful. The action takes place because we have been commanded to do so. In John's account of the Passover, Jesus tells the disciples, "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to

wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (13:14–15). The washing of feet illustrates Jesus' command, or "mandate" (*mandatum* in Latin), emphasizing our call to serve one another as Christ serves. Through this ritual washing, Christians are called deeper into lives of service, a call discerned during each moment of our lives. On this night in which the institution of the Eucharist is commemorated, the washing of feet points to the service implied in our reception of the Eucharist. Partaking of the Eucharist requires that our lives be dedicated to humble service.

The people whose feet are washed during the liturgy are to be representative of the assembly. With a decree in 2016, Pope Francis changed the rubric in the Missal for the washing of feet from "the men who have been chosen" to "those who have been chosen." The decree explains that the change has been made "so that pastors may select a small group of the faithful to represent the variety and the unity of each part of the people of God. Such small groups can be made up of men and women and it is appropriate that they consist of people young and old, healthy and sick, clerics, consecrated men and women and laity."

## On this night why do we process with the Blessed Sacrament away from the Church?

Each year after the Prayer after Communion, the faithful follow in a procession during the Transfer of the Blessed Sacrament to a place of repose. The solemn procession is led by a lay minister with a cross, standing between two ministers holding candles, a thurifer with a smoking thurible, and then the priest carrying the ciborium. One might ask how this procession stands as a metaphor of our reception of the Eucharist. How is the procession with the Blessed Sacrament indicative of a Church that faces outward to the world? In a homily, St. Augustine said that



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The procession with the Blessed Sacrament demonstrates that the Eucharist reaches outside the confines of the church building.

Christians are to become what they celebrate. They are to be bread for the world; they are to be wine poured out for others. Catholics gather at the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper to be strengthened and to be sent back into the world. On this night, the procession with the Blessed Sacrament demonstrates that the Eucharist reaches outside the confines of the church building. As the faithful follows the priest, who carries the consecrated hosts in the ciborium, they are reminded of who they are called to become. Having been nourished by the Word and sustained by Christ's Flesh and Blood, they are to be Christ in the world. This is what Karl Rahner called the liturgy of the world. The liturgy is integrally connected to life, the liturgy calls the faithful to work for justice.

***The implication to work for justice***

To work for justice means to be concerned with the establishment of right relationships. Justice implies a recognition within us and among us of growth as human persons with gifts and grace, with potential and desires, with anxieties, hopes, and fears. Justice includes unity and solidarity, the linking up of our destinies as brothers and sisters who rise together without domination or constraint, without exploitation or manipulation, without discrimination or violence.

While working for justice is equated with the establishment of relationships, liturgy celebrates relationship. At the liturgy, we gather to give praise and thanksgiving, to recall the mighty acts of God in human history, to participate in the memorial of Jesus' victorious death, to pray for the needs of the world, and to celebrate the kingdom of justice and love that is already and that is yet to be. Liturgy is our activity, our service as human persons in all our frailty and weakness, our hunger and thirst for justice still unsated, yet struggling to give expression to the life being shaped in Christ. Liturgy is not a stepping outside of daily life into some mystical realm but a lifting up of our daily-ness, recognizing that we have been touched by God yet are incomplete. It is a gathering of persons who need to let go, to give themselves over, to surrender to the God of mystery, and to receive grace and strength to live no longer for ourselves. With this in mind, feet are washed, the assembly is fed, and the faithful return again to a world broken by war and suffering, a world marked by pain and strife.

The Gospel for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper (John 13:1–15), portrays Jesus as clothing himself in an apron and stooping to wash the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. The Second Reading (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), a text older than the Gospel, describes how on the night before Jesus died, he took

bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples. These four verbs (taking, blessing, breaking, and giving) became associated with the fourfold action of the Eucharist. In the Jewish form of blessing, however, it is not the bread that is blessed but God, who provides our sustenance. The words the priest prays when the bread and wine are presented for the oblation are rooted in the Jewish prayers of blessing. The priest prays, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation.” Continuing, the prayer notes that the blessing is invoked because God has provided bread and wine that will become the Body and Blood of Christ. The people respond, “Blessed be God forever.”

One of the earliest names given to the Eucharist is derived from the third action, “the breaking of bread.” In the First Reading on the Second Sunday of Easter, for example, the reader proclaims that the early community “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. . . . All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions, and divide them among all according to each one’s needs. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes” (Acts 2:42–47). Certainly this rite of bread breaking is another way of speaking about the Eucharist, and its clearest expression is in the mutuality implied in breaking and sharing bread with another person. It is not surprising, then, that we find this expression in Luke’s account of the post-Resurrection appearance of Christ to the two disciples at Emmaus (24:13–35). They did not recognize Christ until he sat at table with them. Then he took bread, pronounced the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to them to eat. Luke emphasizes that the disciples came to recognize Jesus as the Christ in the “breaking of bread.” But the Acts passage makes the connection between breaking bread and sharing property and goods. An implication of receiving the Eucharist is working for greater social justice.

### Anamnesis

The account of the Last Supper in Luke and First Corinthians commands to “do this” as a memorial, or in memory of Christ. This type of remembering is not simply a historical recall; it implies something much greater. In biblical and liturgical terms this is called *anamnesis*. The root of the word is *mne*, meaning “to remember.” That root is recognized in the word *amnesia*, when we forget. The initial *a* (*alpha privative*) means “not” to remember. When the prefix *ana* precedes the word *to remember* (*mnesis*), the meaning is intensified. *Anamnesis* is a kind of remembering in a most intense way. Traces of this remembering are part of the Jewish Passover celebration, where the participants shared a special meal. All the food elements are specially prepared and each food recalls certain events of the history of Israel. In a way, we might say that the participants eat their history. It was and still is a wonderful and ingenious way to transmit religious tradition to children. But in this context, it is not just a recall of past events. Rather, past events are remembered intensely because they are presently meaningful. The Jewish concept of memory, which is linked to the word *zikar*, has a different orientation. The connotation is not so much that past events are rendered present but that the past is tended to with an



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The Eucharist is the objective transmission of the Gospel through ordinary signs such as bread and wine.

eye to the future. Just as God has been faithful and merciful in the past, it is believed that God will so be in the future. Thus the participants in the act of sharing the Passover meal become present to the past.

### THE THREE ORDINANCES

At the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the mandate that Jesus gave to his followers is recalled in several forms. Jesus did not give just one command but what could be termed as three ordinances, namely:

1. “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24).
2. “If I, therefore, the master and teacher have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (John 13:14–15).
3. “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you should also love one another” (John 13:34).

Normally, the washing of feet is called the mandate. The word *mandate*, though, also can refer to the memorial command or to the fundamental commandment to love one another. One is left, then, with a query concerning the memorial command. When Jesus says, “Do this,” to what does the “this” refer? The narrow interpretation would be that “this” is the act of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of bread and drinking together from the one cup. But as feet are washed in the liturgy on Holy

Thursday, it becomes obvious that “do this” refers to sharing, serving, and loving each other.

The Preface for this evening refers to the sacrament as an “everlasting sacrifice” and a “memorial” through which “we are made strong” and “washed clean.” The faithful’s reception of Communion is not primarily a time for individual, subjective recollection of Jesus’ life and death. The Eucharist is the objective transmission of the Gospel through ordinary signs such as bread and wine. The sacrifice of Jesus two thousand years ago is being set forth now, before God, as a memorial. This, to be sure, is not a “re-sacrificing” of Christ (Hebrews 10:12 makes clear that Christ could be sacrificed only once), but, by faith, it is the application of the benefits of Christ’s once-for-all death.

When the Church gathers to “do this in remembrance of me,” she is proclaiming Christ’s death (1 Corinthians 11:26) as a memorial before God, who sees the sign and blesses us, nourishing us through the Holy Spirit, with Christ’s Body and Blood. In Communion, God remembers, and we receive. God remembers his promises to us, God’s people, setting these promises before us on the table as Christ’s Body given for us; his Blood poured out for us.

In praying the Lord’s Prayer, reference is made to the bread that God gives, a reference with its own implications. The words *Give us this day our daily bread* oblige us to do everything possible to end, or at least reduce, the scandal of hunger and malnutrition. As part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the prayer schools us in social justice and calls us to assume our specific responsibilities to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick. On Holy Thursday, during the procession of the Eucharistic species from the church building, we are especially cognizant that, implied in participation in the Eucharist, is a duty to act in the world and to realize in some fashion the Beatitudes. Holy Thursday is an appropriate time for the homilist to point out that how we pray (*lex orandi*) should lead to how we live (*lex vivendi*). The collection taken up for the poor on Holy Thursday provides communities the opportunity to live into this call. A well-worded bulletin announcement can reinforce the homily that connects the Eucharist and justice.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has focused on four aspects of the Lord’s Last Supper. The Collect calls the Supper “the banquet of his (Christ’s) love” and “so great a mystery.” The antiphon for the foot washing (“I give you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you” connects service and love. This is the basis for the Church’s liturgy. The pre-Christian usage of the term *leitourgia* was originally a service of the state voluntarily accepted. Christians should give to others voluntarily, since it is a privilege to help in some way the household of God. *Leitourgia* is certainly a biblical term and the writers of the early Church used it often. For example, Paul uses the word *leitourgia* in 2 Corinthians 9:12. In classical Greek, this is a word with a noble history, derived from *laos*, meaning “people” and *ergon*, meaning “work.” The term has been translated as “the work of the people.” That translation, though, leaves God out of the equation. *Leitourgia* is better rendered as a public work—both God’s and ours.

St. John Chrysostom, the fourth-century priest from Antioch who became the archbishop of Constantinople, speaks about *leitourgia* in the larger sense. One of the recurring features of his homilies is his emphasis on care for the needy. In these homilies, he echoes themes from the Gospel of Matthew, and calls upon the rich to lay aside materialism in favor of helping the poor: “It is not possible for one to be wealthy and just at the same time. Do you pay such honor to your excrements as to receive them into a silver chamber-pot when another man made in the image of God is perishing in the cold?” Commenting on 2 Corinthians 9, Chrysostom notes the connections between service and ministry which is referenced as a liturgy. He insists that the Eucharist must be translated into helping the poor. For him, helping the poor is just as much a liturgy as celebrating the Eucharist. Elsewhere, he writes:

Do you wish to honor the Body of Christ? Do not ignore Him when he is naked. Do not pay homage in the temple clad in silk—only then to neglect Him outside where He suffers cold and nakedness. He who said, “This is my body” is the same One who said, “You saw Me hungry and you gave Me no food” and “Whatever you did for the least of My brothers, you did also for Me.” What good is it if the Eucharistic Table is overloaded with golden chalices, when He is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying His hunger, and then, with what is left, you may adorn the altar as well. The temple of our afflicted neighbor’s body is more holy than the altar of stone on which you celebrate the holy sacrifice. You are able to contemplate this altar everywhere, in the street and in the open squares.

John Chrysostom’s admonition clearly states that our reception of the Eucharist implies that we are to put into action what we celebrate. Our *lex orandi* logically flows into *lex vivendi*. Our prayer must be translated into the way we live. ♦

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