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MAUNDY THURSDAY

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, April 6th, 2023)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

SINCE THE BEGINNING of Lent the Church has invited her children, by an abundant recourse to Holy Scripture, to renew their firm purpose of a true and deep conversion, an invitation supported by God's will and power, since He alone can restore man in his union with Him. The Lord's many miracles and teachings have confirmed the divine will of salvation.

On this path, Palm Sunday marks a new milestone. We can follow the Lord almost step by step, hour after hour. Three out of the four Passion narratives have been read during the last days Masses, and tomorrow, the solemn liturgical function will bring us back once more at the foot of the Cross, with John the Evangelist's narrative.

In this context, this afternoon's Mass seems to be off-key. Why such pageantry for the last Passover the Lord wished to celebrate with His disciples, which looks closer to a farewell meal? How can we understand it, if not as the expression of the Lord's will, Who very especially singled out this Passover, both to His disciples and to centuries to come.

After the resurrection, the Lord will share several meals with His disciples, thus reassuring all and sundry that He was not a ghost, but truly alive, risen. Why didn't He postpone this unique meal until the vigil of His Ascension, at the moment of the final farewell?

a. *Jn* 6:1-15;
Mk 8:1-10.

Meals are a constant fixture in the Gospel narratives, such as the two bread multiplications near the Sea of Tiberias.^a These miracles, in which two crowds, of respectively five and four thousand men, ate their fill, are already the portend of the gift of another food, how much more plentiful and strengthening. Hadn't the Lord already promised the Samaritan woman, near Jacob's well, an everlasting drink?

b. *Jn* 4:10.14.

If thou didst know the gift of God and who He is that saith to thee: "Give me to drink;" thou perhaps wouldst have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water. [...] But he that shall drink of the water that I will give him shall not thirst for ever. But the water that I will give him shall become in him a fountain of water, springing up into life everlasting.^b

Today's meal is quite unlike other meals. It is the Passover meal. Before He sets off on the road towards His Passion, Jesus carries out the traditional rite which evokes the many kindnesses bestowed by God on His people Israel imprisoned in Egypt, the manna coming down from heaven, their daily bread, their bread of consolation during the forty years they walked in the desert.

This Passover wasn't the first one the Lord had shared with His disciples. However, it was the only one He had eagerly desired to eat.

To introduce this meal, St. John comments on the extreme love seizing the Lord's heart and ruling these moments:

c. *Jn* 13:1.

Before the festival day of the Passover, 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.^c

The hour is now come, on which the excessiveness of the divine love is going to manifest itself. The *fountain of water springing up into everlasting life* promised to the Samaritan woman is now going to flow into each human heart. During these hours, what is at stake is to love unto the end, to love unto the end those by whom He knows He is so poorly loved.

What is the disciples' reaction? They don't understand.

During the first multiplication of the loaves, the Lord had affirmed:

He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath everlasting life: and I will raise him up in the last day. For My flesh is meat indeed: and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood abideth in Me: and I in him.^a

a. Jn 6:54-56.

And St. John added: “Many therefore of His disciples, hearing it, said: This saying is hard; and who can hear it?”^b

b. Ibid., v. 56.

Indeed, who can hear it? Who can understand it?

The great desire which is prompting the Lord is to give Himself as a food. One might expect such a desire to be met with another one in the disciple, that of receiving. The lesson of the first multiplication of the loaves has borne no fruit. The few disciples who will remain with their Master will be scattered away. Judas the traitor will be the first one to leave, to carry out his wretched business, betraying the Master for thirty silver pennies. Peter, taken off guard, will some time later assert not to know this man. Only John, the beloved disciple, will remain at the foot of the Cross.

He alone has remembered the gesture of the washing of the feet, which had given rise to such a sharp reaction in Peter: “Thou shalt never wash my feet... — If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me.”^c

c. Jn 13:8.

The gesture of the washing of the feet and the Eucharist are linked. To love unto the end is to make oneself a servant, it is to give oneself.

The Last Supper and the Cross reveal what is in the depths of hearts. They extol God’s inexhaustible love. They also highlight the smallness and weakness of human hearts.

If God comes to us prompted by a great desire, how can we in return receive Him with a great desire, if not by walking in the Master’s footsteps? Not on a road of glory and power, but on the humble footpath of Him Who bears His cross, the cross of the Suffering Servant Who lays down His life for His sheep.

Today, the Lord wishes to make our hearts lighter, and free them from their heaviness. He wants to feed us with the bread

that gives life. He offers us His new commandment: “That you love one another. As I have loved you, that you also love one another.”^a

a. Jn 13:34.

Eucharistic communion unites us to the Body and Blood of Christ. Going to Mass means going to the Calvary. It means entering into communion with the Paschal mystery. The Lord’s words, “Do this in remembrance of me,”^b are but the expression of this great desire, that beyond this first Eucharistic meal, the fruits of communion should come and heal all men. God knows what our needs are:

b. Lk 22:19.

If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink. [...] Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.^c

c. Jn 7:37–38.

Let us allow this thirst to be born in us. Let us love the Lord unto the end. Let us go to Him. The world and the Church need these rivers of living water.

Amen.

