

The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper

Bathed in the light of the Passover moon, this night is deeply sacred. Sacred because it takes us deep into human history, thousands of years ago, when many people were nomads wandering from one pasture to another. The Passover ceremony which we commemorate this evening, which was the Lord's final one, has its roots in the nomadic practice of moving animal herds from winter to spring pastures at night, under the light of the moon. In their primitive faith they sacrificed an animal from the flock to ensure a safe passage and divine protection.

I mention this because it is so important to see tonight's celebration as rooted in the human story which has developed over hundreds of thousands of years. The nomadic practice somehow blended with that escape from Egyptian slavery which is the historical core of the Passover. That sacred night when God intervened in human history to ensure the deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery to freedom and the promised land. That event has been commemorated ever since in the Passover Meal, which we heard described in our reading from Exodus and which was celebrated by Jesus the night before he died on Calvary.

The struggle of humanity from those mysterious moments of early evolution and shaping of the human form came to a momentous point at that Passover meal which Jesus celebrated somewhere in Jerusalem. We now know that the evolutionary process is God given and is all about forming and shaping humanity so that it can come to the fullness of life by sharing in the life of the creator.

So tonight is Sacred because at his last Passover Meal Jesus took bread and wine from the table which were elements which speak eloquently of the human struggle and hope for perfect joy and true life. Bread which is that vital source of nourishment and life which has been made and carried on life's journey by human beings since time immemorial and wine which speaks of God's promise of abundant life and gifts and our hope of joy in his presence. Archaeological evidence tells us that both bread and wine existed 8000 years ago.

Jesus took both bread and wine and gave them as his body and blood, the life of God himself given to human beings to bring completion and new life.

In the unfolding of human history tonight is the reliving of that moment when God's care for us and his life giving love became visible and available in a most perfect way. Jesus gives himself to us as food so that we might be drawn into himself and shaped in his image. The giving of himself in the Eucharistic food is the same giving of himself on the cross both to us and to his Father in the life of God. That is why we call the gift of his Body and Blood the Eucharist which means thanksgiving. Each time we celebrate Mass or the Eucharist we join Jesus most perfectly in his eternal act of love and thanksgiving to his Father and each time we eat and drink his body and blood each of us and all of us together become part of his eternal self-offering where we find the fulfilment of all our desires for life and love.

This celebration of Jesus' presence among us in the gift of his Body and Blood stands at the heart of God's work of creation and is a key point in human history because it brings us into a new creation which is about transformation and perfection. The future is bathed in divine light and splendour and our hope is true and without deceit. All this is why tonight's gift of the Eucharist is so precious and why the time is right to renew our commitment and love for the gift of the Lord's body and Blood.

We renew that commitment and love by reminding ourselves of the importance of Sunday Mass which places tonight's gift of the New Passover and Covenant in the pattern of our lives as we acknowledge that we were created to do this in remembrance of Jesus. A serious obligation indeed and one, which when practised, draws us more deeply into the new life of resurrection.

We renew that commitment and love by appreciating anew the gift of the priesthood and the ordained ministry. There can be no celebration of the Eucharist without priests which means there can be no church either. That appreciation of the priesthood must give way to fostering an attitude within our communities and young people that priesthood is a gift and privilege that must be open to more people. The evidence would indicate that a lot of work needs to be done in this direction by Catholic communities in this country.

We renew our commitment to and love for the Eucharist by remembering that those who celebrate it are committed to service in the name of Christ. It is no accident that tonight's Gospel tells of Jesus' washing his disciples feet at the Last Supper. There are two important points: The first that this task in Jesus' time was a menial one which was done by the lowest slave in the household; the second that instead of doing it at the beginning when it was usually done, Jesus puts it in the middle of the meal, making it not a preparation for the meal but something that is as important as the meal itself. Those who eat and drink at the Eucharist are those who must live their lives following the example of Christ the servant who emptied himself of his divine nature and assumed the condition of a slave.