This Mass of the Lord’s Supper
Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo
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Holy Thursday
St. Mary’s Cathedral

This Mass of the Lord’s Supper is majestic in the mysteries that it celebrates, but there’s also an intimacy about it. Jesus and his closest disciples have gathered in an upper room for the Passover meal, and he opens his heart to them, telling them so much about his relationship with his Father, and his own mission among them. He shares with them the deepest mysteries that would move them forward in faith, and we are there. We are admitted into that private supper, not just as bystanders but as participants. Jesus opens the doors of that upper room and he invites us around the table to experience what the apostles experienced: a profoundly spiritual but tangible manifestation of the love of Christ for his people, his Church, and for the world.

The most striking event of that supper was the Eucharist. Jesus anticipated his impending death, the sacrifice that he would make of his own life as atonement for our sins. And he draws us into that sacrifice by giving us the Eucharist. Just as the Passover lamb was sacrificed and given to Israel, so now the true Passover lamb is sacrificed and given to the new Israel. “Take and eat, this is my body…Take and drink, this is my blood.” Jesus gives us himself so that we might be always in communion with him in his death and resurrection.

It’s somewhat ironic that we call this the Last Supper, because these simple events were the beginning of billions of commemorations in Eucharistic liturgies throughout the centuries all over the earth. The Eucharist has been celebrated by priests, bishops, popes, and the faithful all over the world: in great basilicas like St. Peter’s in Rome and in cathedrals like this one; in little parish churches in the country; on battlefields during wartime; in stadiums before tens of thousands of people; on lakeshores and seacoasts; in the darkness of catacombs and concentration camps. As Pope St. John Paul II tells us, these varied scenarios for celebrations of the Eucharist give us “a powerful experience of its universal and even cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation.”

In a certain sense, these events of Holy Thursday are incomplete realities. They look forward to what is to come for their completion. The very next day the Blood of the Eucharist must be shed and the Body must be broken. But even then, when we see the lifeless body of Jesus on the cross, we must keep going. The Eucharist is not a funeral procession, because Jesus lives. On the third day He comes back to life, never to die again. In the Eucharist, Jesus fulfills what he promised his disciples: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” The Eucharist, because it is the real presence of Jesus himself, has been the single greatest source of spiritual joy and consolation that the Christian world has ever seen.

But there is another dimension to this celebration: the establishment of the holy priesthood. Jesus assures us that the Church would not have its hands tied behind its back. He gives us the Eucharist, and beginning with his apostles, he gives us the priesthood to ensure the perpetual celebration of his Eucharist for all people of all times and places. A theologian named von Balthasar tells us that a good priest is always a miracle of grace, and how true this is. Jesus calls these men to be his intimate companions, to be his voice, to be his gentle hands. He calls them to be his instruments of grace in the world, to do what he began to do two thousand years ago. Even in these days when the priesthood is somewhat embattled, Jesus continues to abide in his Church, and he most certainly is at work through the mysterious powers that he gives to his priests. In the enduring gift of the priesthood, Jesus teaches us his Gospel; he baptizes us and makes us sharers in his grace, he pronounces words of absolution and forgives our sins, and of
course, he gives to his Church the mystery of his Eucharistic presence. In the person of the priest, Jesus himself continues to shepherd us, and to lead us as his holy people, his new Israel.

And finally, to tie it all together, Jesus teaches us the importance of charity and service. In a moment that must have baffled his apostles, Peter most of all, Jesus puts on the apron of a slave, bows down, and starts to wash their feet. He does this not because they needed a servant to freshen them up. No, he does this to show them by his own example what they too must do. Jesus gives them a commission to wash the feet of others, in other words, to serve others and to reach out to those in need. “As I have done, so you also must do.” In an act of humble love, he shows them that God is love. By this action, Jesus brings them and us right into the Trinitarian love of God. He makes clear that the Church is built on love, his love, and we must go out and bring that love to others. Nourished and strengthened by the Eucharist, and sustained by the priests of the New Covenant, the Church tries to extend her love to those people and places that know little of love. Far from being self-directed in her sacraments, the Church is commissioned to go to others, to be their servants, and to witness to them the love that we have received.

So, to use the words of John Paul II once again, this celebration has a cosmic character because it unites heaven and earth, it embraces and permeates all creation and transforms it by God’s purifying love. As we enter into this Sacred Triduum, these three days of grace, let us celebrate the Eucharist with wonder, as if for the first time; let us give thanks for the gift of the miracle of grace that is the priesthood, and let us recommit ourselves to the servant love that Jesus calls us to as his disciples.