

# HOLY THURSDAY

## A Bishop's Letter to His Clergy

I greet you in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who tonight has fed us, washed our feet, taken us to the Garden and has bid us to watch with Him for one hour. Tonight while we sleep He will be arrested, tried, denied, and ridiculed after already having been betrayed. Indeed, I speak not only of His saving events of Two Thousand years ago, but I speak of this very night.

On this night even as a child I remember the three words added to the Words of Institution for Holy Thursday, “for in the night in which he was betrayed **this very night.....**” It became obvious to me that the reliving of this night is essential for every Christian. Moreover, being in that parish where the Kiss of Peace was exchanged by Celebrant, Deacon, Subdeacon and servers normatively except on the night on which Jesus was betrayed with a Kiss, I am acutely aware of how cheap our peace is and how superficial and sometimes deceiving our kisses are in an age of deceit, betrayal, denial, and apathy.

To say that we live in a “post modern world” or a “post Christian world” is too obvious even to utter. As is the case with most labels, once we label someone or something, we can dismiss the person or the concept without gaining further information. The real tragedy, however, is not that we have lost so much in Christianity, but that we Christians have allowed the loss to take place, by our apathy, indifference, preoccupation, and weak leadership. I say this to you as I prepare to retire to my Chapel in my residence to pray for you – those committed to my care as your chief pastor. I am acutely aware that “to whom much has been given, much will be required.” Moreover I am mindful of the fact that I am obliged to teach the truth of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Word of God, in the Creeds, and in the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. I am obliged to teach a truth, if not for your sake, but for my own, that is not always easy

and often runs counter to the culture. I am reminded of the words of Holy Scripture that tell us that if I lead a little one astray, it would be better for a mill stone to be tied around my neck and that I be dropped into the sea. Being brought up in a Western Pennsylvania mill town by three rivers, I have a very strong image in my mind of that reality.

Tonight I must pray for the priesthood, and thus all ministry as I focus on not only the unfolding of the Drama of the Liturgy of Maundy Thursday but also your presence with me at the Cathedral as three bishops, priests and deacons renewed their ordination vows, I blessed the three Holy Oils, and gave to each priest or deacon the *fermentum* (the consecrated host) that was handed by the deacon to the priest who then placed it in the Chalice tonight. Indeed, our interconnectedness is obvious in these actions, and our true sense of collegiality was expressed – a collegiality that is expressed in a common unbroken faith, without change and without compromise. This Jesus, who is without sin and who would not compromise with the culture or the religious authorities washed our feet tonight, and tomorrow He will wash away our sins. Last Sunday we shouted Hosanna (save us) and tomorrow he will take us at our word. If He had sinned or if we believed that we do not sin, then all that we have done this Holy Week is ridiculous. Perhaps that is why I am motivated to write.

As most of you know I do not broadcast too many letters. Open letters and other communications tend to call attention to oneself, one's feelings or one's self-righteousness. They also invite opportunities for people with a busy “forward button” to pass judgment on every spelling error and every faulty thought. If I am guilty of either self-righteousness or self-centeredness then I ask your forgiveness. What I believe God has asked me to tell you is that He loves you personally, and all He wants is for you to walk with Him. Jesus wants us to walk with Him carrying palms; He wants us to walk with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane; He wants us to walk with Him to

Venerate the Cross (for our sake) at Calvary and He wants us to walk to the empty tomb.

I used to be a bit indignant, or at least a bit annoyed with how rapidly the observance of Holy Week has changed. I used to be upset on Good Friday as I remembered a day when all schools were closed (not a “Spring Break” for vacation purposes), when all banks were closed from Noon until 3:00 P.M., no sporting events would take place until after 3:00 P.M., and children were not permitted to play outdoors until after 3:00 P.M. I am only 56 years old, but the changes that I have seen no longer make me angry, instead they make me very sad. They are not the fault of politically correct educators or mercenary merchants alone, rather it is the fault of the Christian population for allowing it to happen. For if the society believes that it is the master of its own destiny, and believes that it can save everything itself, perhaps it is not illogical to recognize that it was just a matter of time before the culture no longer saw a need for a Savior. If we do not believe in our own sinfulness and the necessity of being washed by the blood of the Lamb of God and to be in Communion with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, then we can do as Robert Bellah suggested years ago and create a civil religion with the McBible, the McSacraments, and the McSins as centerpieces of our “religion.” In a “post Bellah” church and society we can even conform to the culture and justify our positions on the basis of an ever changing set of standards, revealed to a self actualized culture where being nice and pleasant is more important than caring for our own salvation and that of others, and where collegiality means showing up, conforming, and not making a fuss. Indeed, Jesus foretold of the time when believing in Him and following Him would be divisive, separating even families.

And so what shall I take to the Garden of Gethsemane in just a few moments? I will ask Jesus to forgive me for the times when I was more concerned about other peoples' opinions than His. I will ask for forgiveness for not telling you often

enough that Holy Week is really not an option for Christians: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Great Vigil/ Easter are not optional observances for those who follow Jesus Christ. Fasting and devotions such as Stations of the Cross are not high-church affectations – they are essential for our soul’s health.

The Passover Meal (Seder) was passed down from generation to generation by persecuted people who saw the need to remember: to remember their, faith, their heritage, their identity, and what God had done in their lives. We Christians, and particularly we who call ourselves Anglicans and Episcopalians will lose our identity, our customs, our traditions, and indeed our faith when we place the culture before Jesus – when we place our needs before His – when we tithe to the culture but only tip God – when we cancel our Holy Week Liturgies because “not enough people come.” Our Holy Diocesan Patron St. Paul tells us that he passes on to us what he himself received. What will we pass on to our children? Will it be memories of a day when Christ was central in a Nation that was founded to have “freedom of religion” or a family and culture that lives out the implications of “freedom from religion!”

I am deeply saddened when I do not see our churches packed on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil, for these Liturgies are the liturgies children best understand, because they operate on the symbolic level rather than the didactic level. Dummying down our liturgies is an insult to the power of the Holy Spirit who conveys more of truth and reality than our poor words can ever convey. Tonight we take these matters into the Garden as we watch with Him for one hour in our churches, before His most precious presence among us. Thank you for allowing me to be the chief servant of this Diocese. Thank you for sharing with me in the ministry of washing feet. But, beloved, pray with me that we may be renewed so that the Kingdom of Christ will be extended. This will only happen if we are willing to allow Jesus Christ to be Lord of our life. May

we say with our Holy Patron, St. Paul, “Since Christ’s blood has now given us God’s approval, we are even more certain that, because of this restored relationship, the life His Son lived will save us.” (Romans 5:10)

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