

HOLY THURSDAY – 2009
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Tonight we enter into the most holy time of the whole Church year--the Sacred Triduum (Latin for 'three days') during which we remember and enter into the events by which we and all mankind are reconciled to God. The Triduum begins on this Holy Thursday night at this Mass of the Lord's Supper. It continues on the road to Calvary tomorrow on Good Friday, into Holy Saturday as we keep watch at Jesus' tomb, and finally to the great joy and gladness of Easter. But we're not there yet--we can only proceed one solemn step at a time.

So again: we begin on this Holy Thursday; we begin to remember. Remembering is a distinctively human act--recalling some person or event of the past and bringing that memory to the present. And there are many ways of retrieving those memories. Sometimes just seeing a certain object will accomplish that: pictures in a photo album or on your wall, a gift you received several years from a dear friend, a memento or souvenir from a favorite vacation spot. In my office and in my room at the rectory, for example, I have many things that remind me of my parents who both died back in the late 1980's. I imagine most if not all of you have keepsakes like that. Those things may not be worth large amounts of money, but that's irrelevant. The point is: those things are priceless because they bring our loved ones to mind.

On this Holy Thursday night, we remember and rejoice in a most special and unique gift, a memento unlike any other. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave the apostles a remembrance of himself--but much more, infinitely more than just a remembrance. In giving them and us the Eucharist, Jesus gave himself--his very own Body and Blood under the outward appearance of bread and wine. In our first reading tonight (from Exodus) we heard about the origins of the feast of Passover (which our Jewish brothers and sisters continue to celebrate at this time of year). It was to help the Israelites remember how God freed them from slavery in Egypt and then led them to the Promised Land.

But the Eucharist given by Jesus at the Last Supper goes far beyond that. The Passover was about recalling an event from the past. The Eucharist is Jesus' gift of himself to the apostles, to the Church and to the world back then, throughout history, now in our own time and in the future to the end of the world. Think about it this way: what is the one thing that lovers want most of all? They simply want to be with the one who they love, and they don't ever want to be parted. That's why death is thought to be such a loss, the ultimate tragedy--taking away from you one you love.

Well, Jesus is a lover also. Remember what I told you a week ago last Sunday about Mother Teresa's experience of Jesus' deep, burning, passionate love for us--his thirst for us. Jesus longs for us, and as a lover he wants to be with us. And in giving us the Eucharist (and the priesthood--the means by which Jesus continues his Eucharistic presence in the world and throughout history), Jesus brings that desire to fruition and completion. Jesus the divine Lover is with us always--not just as a holy memory or a prayerful nostalgia, but in the fullness of his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. The Eucharist is no mere memento, no mere keepsake. It is Jesus Christ himself--he comes to us and he makes it possible for us to come to him.

That's why Vatican II calls the Mass, the Eucharist the source and summit of our Catholic faith. That's why we keep the Eucharist--the Blessed Sacrament--reserved in special places of honor in our tabernacles. That's why the Catholic Church has always taken care to build churches that are noble and beautiful places of worship and adoration--because they are places where Jesus comes to our altars and becomes our food and drink. That's why the Church continues to have its Eucharistic devotions like Perpetual Adoration, Benediction and others. Finally, that's why this Holy Thursday

Mass will end as it always does with our procession with the Blessed Sacrament around this whole church building--to honor, worship and adore Jesus our Savior whose real presence in the Eucharist began at that Last Supper, that first Eucharist, nearly 2000 years ago.

Jesus longs for us, thirsts for us, loves us, is head-over-heels in love with us. And as Son of God, he makes it possible through the Eucharist to be with us, his beloved brothers and sisters, at all times. He offers himself to us in bread and wine that have changed into his Body and Blood, the real thing (no cheap substitute, no mere souvenir). How incredibly and astonishingly blessed and privileged we are to be offered this divine Gift, this never-ending companionship and genuine, tangible presence of our Savior!