137. The Gift of Love

By Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D.

1. “Having loved His own … He loved them unto the end” (John 13:1), and in those last intimate hours spent in their midst, He wished to give them the greatest proof of His love. Those were hours of sweet intimacy, but also of most painful anguish. Judas had already set the price of the infamous sale; Peter was about to deny his Master; all of them within a short time would abandon Him. The institution of the Eucharist appeared then as the answer of Jesus to the treachery of men, as the greatest gift of His infinite love in return for the blackest ingratitude. The merciful God would pursue His rebellious creatures, not with threats, but with the most delicate devices of His immense charity. Jesus had already done and suffered so much for sinful man, but now, at the moment when human malice is about to sound the lowest depths of the abyss, He exhausts the resources of His love, and offers Himself to man, not only as the Redeemer, Who will die for him on the Cross, but also as the food which will nourish him. He will feed man with His own Flesh and Blood; moreover, death might claim Him in a few hours, but the Eucharist will perpetuate His real, living presence until the end of time. “O You Who are mad about Your creature!” exclaimed St. Catherine of Siena, “true God and true Man, You have left Yourself wholly to us, as food, so that we will not fall through weariness during our pilgrimage in this life, but will be fortified by You, celestial Nourishment!”

Today’s Mass is, in a very special way, the commemoration and renewal of the Last Supper, in which we are all invited to participate. Let us enter the Church and gather close around the altar as if going into the Cenacle to gather around Jesus. Here we find, as did the Apostles in Jerusalem, the Master living in our midst, and He Himself, through the person of His minister, will renew once again the great miracle which changes bread and wine into His Body and Blood; He will say to us, “Take and eat … take and drink.”

It was Jesus Himself Who made the arrangements for the Last Supper, choosing “a large room” (Luke 22:12), and bidding the Apostles to prepare it suitably. Our hearts, dilated and made spacious by love, must also be a “large” cenacle, where Jesus may come and worthily celebrate His Pasch.

2. During the Last Supper and coincident with His gift of the Sacrament of love, Jesus also left us His testament of love — the living, concrete testament of His admirable example of humility and charity in the washing of the Apostles’ feet, and His oral testament in the proclamation of His “new commandment.” The Gospel of today’s Mass (John 13:1-15) shows

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us Jesus, as the Master, washing the Apostles' feet; it ends with His words: "I have given you an example, that as I have done, you also may do." It is an urgent invitation to that fraternal charity which should be the fruit of union with Jesus, the fruit of our Eucharistic Communion. He mentioned it in precise words at the Last Supper: "A new commandment I give unto you: that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34).

If we cannot imitate the love of Jesus by giving our body as food to our brethren, we can imitate Him at least by giving them loving assistance, not only in agreeable circumstances, but also in difficult and disagreeable ones. By washing His disciples' feet, the Master shows us how far we should humble ourselves to render a service to our neighbor, even were he the most lowly and abject. The Master, Who, by unceasing proofs of His love, advances to meet ungrateful men and even those who have betrayed Him, teaches us that our charity is far from His unless we repay evil with good, forgive everything, and are even willing to repay with kindness those who have done us harm. The Master, Who gave His life for the salvation of His own, tells us that our love is incomplete if we cannot sacrifice ourselves generously for others. His "new commandment," which makes the love of Jesus Himself the measure of our fraternal love, opens up unlimited horizons for the exercise of charity, for it means charity without limits. If there is a limit, it is that of giving, like the Master, one's life for others, for "greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Jesus revealed to us the perfection of fraternal charity on the same evening that He instituted the Eucharist, as if to indicate that such perfection should be both the fruit of the Sacrament of the Eucharist and our response to this great gift.

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