

Be Not Afraid
Bishop John M. LeVoir's Monthly Column
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THE MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

by Bishop John M. LeVoir

Soon, the Church will be celebrating the Easter Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. This is the holiest time of the year. It is a time when God is particularly active in the Church and in the world. It is a time to celebrate our salvation in Jesus Christ. In this column, I would like to focus on the first day of the Paschal Triduum, namely, Holy Thursday, on which the Church celebrates the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

On the first Holy Thursday, Jesus gathered with his Apostles in the upper room in Jerusalem and celebrated with them the Last Supper. It was the final meal that Jesus was to eat with his Apostles before he suffered and died on the cross the very next day on Good Friday. The Last Supper was the Jewish Passover meal which Jesus transformed into the first Mass. Being a Passover meal, the Last Supper has origins which go back centuries, deep into the history of the Jewish people.

More than thirteen hundred years before the birth of Jesus, God's Chosen People, the Israelites, had been slaves in Egypt for some four hundred years and suffered greatly. But, God knew of their suffering and called a man named Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom, especially freedom to worship God and to practice their faith. Moses answered God's call, and in God's name, he asked the king of Egypt to let the Israelites go free. However, the king refused.

By rejecting God's word and his request to free the Israelites, the king brought a series of plagues upon the land and people of Egypt. There was much suffering, and many Egyptians died from the plagues. But even after nine plagues, the king, or pharaoh, would not allow Moses to lead the Israelite people out of Egypt.

Before the tenth plague, God asked Moses to instruct the Israelites to kill a young lamb and to wipe blood from the lamb onto the door frames of their homes. They were to roast the lamb and eat a special meal that evening. During the night, the plague struck and the firstborn in each house died, except for the houses marked with the blood of the lambs. By the blood of the lamb, God protected the Israelites from the tenth plague.

After this plague, Pharaoh freed the Israelites, and they left Egypt (see Exodus 12:1-36). The Jewish people celebrate the event each year by praising and honoring God, and by eating the Passover meal. The meal is called Passover because the Lord "passed over" the houses of the Israelites, sparing their first born from death.

Many centuries after the first Passover, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate that Jewish feast. The crowds of people waved palm branches and laid down their cloaks on the road as a way of praising Jesus. Today we remember and celebrate Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter. Several days after his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve Apostles celebrated the Passover which was transformed by Jesus into the celebration of the Eucharist.

Using the unleavened bread and the wine of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Apostles and the Church the Holy Eucharist as an act of love. At the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread and changed it into his Body and he took the wine and changed it into his Blood. Jesus asked his Apostles to do the same in remembrance of him. In other words, Jesus commissioned the Apostles and through them, their successors, to celebrate Mass and to ensure that Mass would be celebrated in the Church throughout the ages. In this way, Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The Holy Eucharist is not merely a symbol of the Body and Blood of Jesus. Through the words of Consecration at Mass, Jesus, acting through the priest, changes the bread and wine into his Body and Blood. "It is Christ himself, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant who, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. And it is the same Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine, who is the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice" (CCC 1410).

When the priest says, "This is my Body" over the bread and "This is the chalice of my Blood" over the wine, the bread and wine still appear to be bread and wine. But, in fact, the bread becomes Jesus' Body and the wine becomes Jesus' Blood. Jesus is present and living, whole and entire under the appearance of both bread and wine. This change is one of the mysteries of our Catholic faith. We will never fully understand it. The name for this change is "transubstantiation."

Jesus emphasized the importance of eating his Body and drinking his Blood when he said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:54-56). Partaking of the Eucharist gives us the grace to be missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

In addition, Jesus' sacrifice of love on the Cross is re-presented at Mass. This does not mean that Jesus dies again at Mass. Instead, it means that at each Mass Jesus offers to us the same redeeming love that he showed on the Cross. "The Paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated, not repeated" (CCC 1104). We accept that redeeming love by participating fully at each Mass we attend. In every Mass, "there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present" (CCC 1104). The Mass becomes for us "a foretaste, in the heavenly liturgy" (CCC 1111).

The Last Supper is important because at it, Jesus gave us the two great sacraments of the Eucharist and Holy Orders. Moreover, in St. John's Gospel account, Jesus shows us that being his follower means being a servant, and so he washed the Apostles' feet. The celebrant at the Holy Thursday liturgy reenacts Jesus' act of service by washing the feet of others. The Eucharist, the priesthood, and the service of others are the gifts that Jesus gives us on Holy Thursday.

Finally, Jesus remains with us in the Holy Eucharist. In most Catholic churches, the Hosts (the Body of Jesus) remaining after Mass are placed in the tabernacle: Jesus "waits for us" in the tabernacle. We can be with him whenever we want by making a visit to church or when there are special times for Eucharistic adoration. In the Eucharist, Jesus is with us always.

Soon, the Church will be celebrating the Easter Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. This is the holiest time of the year. Participate in the sacred mysteries of the Paschal Triduum. Open your hearts to the redeeming love of Jesus Christ.