

My friends in Christ, with tonight's commemoration of the Lord's Last Supper, we celebrate the beginning of two of the seven Sacraments that Jesus Christ instituted for His Church: Eucharist and Holy Orders: the Eucharist ("This is My Body.... This is the Chalice of My Blood."); and Holy Orders ("Do this in memory of Me."). And so, through the celebration of the Mass, the confection of the Eucharist, and the ongoing service of the priesthood, the Lord fulfills His own prophecy, His own most solemn promise: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

These, then, are the sacramental particulars of tonight's commemoration – only part of why tonight continues to be of highest importance for Christians worldwide (and specifically for *Catholic* Christians). And there is also the broader context of the Lord's Last Supper and our celebration of it that testifies to the profound mystery and solemnity of what we are about these next three days.

The Mass of the Lord's Last Supper is the beginning of the Christian Pasch...the beginning of the Sacred Triduum – the three holiest days of the Catholic liturgical year that commemorate the Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. The Mass of the Lord's Last Supper on Holy Thursday, the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday, and at last the Solemnity of the Resurrection at the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday: these three days, these three separate celebrations – they actually comprise one single liturgy. If we were to attend all three celebrations, and we observe how this single liturgy unfolds, and we can actually see the visual transformation of the church and the sanctuary as we go from one celebration to the next – all of that works together, in harmonious concert, to assist us in entering more deeply, more profoundly, into the Paschal Mystery. Consider, for example, the Sign of the Cross that normally begins and ends each Mass; we *began* tonight with the Sign of the Cross, but we will not *end* with it, so that tonight's celebration will just sort of...fade away. In place of an ending Sign of the Cross, we process to our chapel of repose in the Upper Room with the Blessed Sacrament, and our celebration will end without a firm, formal ending. Tomorrow, the Veneration of the Cross will not begin with a Sign of the Cross, nor will it end with it; instead, like an epic film, we will simply fade from black as it were and then at the end fade back into black. And finally, the

Easter Vigil *does* begin with the Sign of the Cross...but we are not even inside the church when we begin but instead are outside waiting to enter, with only the Vigil fire to keep us warm and the light of the Paschal Candle to shine in the darkness.

The Sacred Triduum...the three days of the holiest time of the liturgical year...yet all of it in very truth enveloped within one great liturgy which is celebrated in three parts – one great story told in three chapters. These, then, are the Paschal festivities...the Christian Pasch.

That word itself “Pasch” is just a single word – five letters, one syllable – that speaks *volumes* about all that is taking place here in these next three days. The word “Pasch” is a Hebrew word the meaning of which is manifold; at one and the same time, it means “Passover” (as in the Passover of the Lord in the Book of Exodus, when the angel of death “passed over” the homes of the Hebrews so as to spare those families of the death of their first-born), *and* it means “passion” (as in suffering; the sufferings that the Chosen People were made to endure in the desert and, really, ever since then; the suffering of the Suffering Servant as was foretold by the Prophet Isaiah; and the suffering of the Servant Himself – the Messiah, Who is Christ the Lord), *and* it means “passage” (that is, the passage of the Chosen People through the parting of the Red Sea...the passage of Christ through the streets of Jerusalem on His way up to Golgotha...the passage of Christians: we who are the pilgrim people on a pilgrim’s journey, muddling through this mortal coil towards halls of heavenly realms).

And *all* of this is packed in that one little word “Pasch.” So small a word; such a little word; and yet, a very rich word indeed, encapsulating a very rich theology, a very rich tradition. Our word in English, “Easter,” just does not quite pack the same punch – but there it is. The Christian Pasch, on the other hand: a deeply profound mystery of a most sublime splendor.

Saint Augustine teaches us that “by His suffering, the Lord made the passage from death to life.” The sequence of events that ultimately lead to His death actually begin on Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem and was praised like some conquering hero and the return of the king – but how quickly those cheers and songs of “Hosanna” and “Blessed is He” were mutilated and warped,

so easily transformed into Satan's howling anthem of "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" But situated in the midst of the palms and the passion...is the Last Supper. These last days of His mortal life now bring us to the Pasch, and the Pasch begins when the Lord sits down at table with His dear friends, His closest companions: the Twelve Apostles. Seated at table, He eats His last supper...celebrates His first Mass. He proclaims that the bread is His Sacred Body, the wine His Precious Blood – His Body given up and His Blood poured out. But this is strange! There is no violence happening then at the Last Supper; just thirteen guys having dinner! But of course, we know now as Christians, just as the Apostles would soon know in hindsight not twelve hours later after the supper, that with His Last Supper, Jesus is firmly establishing a mystical and sacramental union between what happens on the Cross and what is commemorated on the altar.

That is the great mystery of the Mass, the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar. Whenever we are *here* at the Mass, in the mystery of the Sacrament we are also *there* at the foot of the Cross. And there at the foot of the Cross, Mary Magdalene wept, and the Beloved Disciple (Saint John) was reduced to utter silence, and the Blessed Mother herself was almost fainting with grief and sorrow at the death of her Son. How can it be, therefore, that we who are *here* at the Mass (sacramentally at the foot of the Cross) – how can we *not* do likewise but feel *our* eyes be filled with grateful tears, *our* minds and hearts reduced to the utter silence of sheer awe, *our* very *selves* fall on bended knee – fall in humble, heartfelt adoration of the Lord, Who was *there* on the Cross *and* Who is *here* on the altar?

The Pasch invites us to this – brings us *precisely* to this: that with minds and hearts and souls attuned exclusively to the Paschal Mystery (the Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ our Lord), we would experience the manifold grace and blessings of Almighty God and thus be given a new strength, a new vigor to rise again and carry on with our pilgrim's progress...so that at the end of days, finding ourselves standing at the portals, the very threshold of halls of heavenly realms, we would all of us be given to hear those blessed words from our Lord and our God: "Well done, My good and faithful servants; come and share your Master's joy."