



## “When We Eat This Bread . . .”

Glory in Humble Service

**Msgr. Joseph DeGrocco**

**A**t this Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, Church tradition asks us to commemorate the institution of the Eucharist, the institution of the priesthood, and Jesus’ command of love. In doing so, we can recognize that what binds all three of these together is their rootedness in Jesus’ humble service, a humble service we are enjoined to live out today in our life. So tonight we commemorate the life-giving humble service of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, in all its fullness, and we pray to be so swept up in that life and service as it comes to us tonight that we are changed to be able to live that same life-giving service for one another, in union with him. Tonight we remember, particularly as we sing, “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, / we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, / until you come in glory.” With the revised texts of the Mass that acclamation will change slightly to “When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, / we proclaim your Death, O Lord, / until you come again.”

But our remembrance is not just remembrance as we might ordinarily think of it. No, tonight we are not mimicking the Last Supper, nor does this liturgy ask us to pretend

that we are actually at the Last Supper. Rather, our remembrance is in the Jewish sense of remembering. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, the Passover that is proclaimed in the First Reading for this Mass is an annual memorial of that great act of God that constituted the Israelites as his first people. But “memorial” means so much more than just mentally recalling. Even down to today, devout Jews believe that, in celebrating Passover, they are actually coming out of Egypt with their ancestors, being rescued by God *now*. The power of that past event is brought into the present and is made effective and active in the here and now. In that same way, we commemorate, we remember, the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of Jesus’ life-giving death and Resurrection—his Passover from the cross to new life. We do that at this Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper; we do that throughout the Three Days of the Sacred Triduum; we do that at every Eucharist. It is a commemoration that empowers us *now*, which saves us *now*, because the self-emptying, life-giving gift of Jesus’ sacrifice is made present and powerfully given to us here and now. “When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, / we proclaim your Death, O Lord, / until you come again.”

That’s why we can see the foot washing not only as an act of humble service, but also in its deeper, eucharistic meaning. Its greater significance is as an act of the self-emptying of Jesus, and as a sign of the way we must empty ourselves out of love for one another. “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” Do what? Do the entire life that was symbolized by washing feet, the life that culminated in total abandonment, the total handing over to the Father on the cross. In fact, Jesus’ death on the cross only makes sense in terms of his whole life. His dying for us is simply the ultimate expression and logical conclusion of the way he lived for us. The self-emptying on the cross flowed from the self-emptying of his whole life, and it is this voluntary self-giving of Jesus to the Father that the Eucharist makes present to us. The memorial acclamation echoes the words of the Second Reading: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:27). We are called to proclaim that death not only here at Mass, but in the way we live the Eucharist through the self-gift, the self-emptying love we give to one another every day. So, to partake of the Eucharist must also mean partaking of Jesus’ example of humble service and compassionate love, even to the point of death. It means walking the path that leads through death to eternal life.

Washing feet, service, and companionship with Jesus even all the way to the cross: those are expressions of a life caught up in the passing over which is celebrated in the Three Days of the Sacred Triduum—the Passover of the Lord Jesus. It is a Passover that is celebrated and lived out every time we celebrate the Eucharist. “When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, / we proclaim your Death, O Lord, / until you come again.”

