

The Institution, for His Church in hardship  
1 Corinthians 11:33; Matthew 18:20  
Holy Thursday  
April 9, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

How do you commemorate the Lord's institution of the Sacrament of the Altar, the first celebration of the meal of the New Covenant, when you are unable to gather together and partake together? As the Lord provides silver linings in every situation, he gives us opportunity in this unique situation to ponder anew this covenantal meal with two words of our Lord that typically aren't front and center on this Holy Thursday.

First, by this word of Christ, through his apostle, regarding this Holy Supper: "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another."

Who among us had not previously taken for granted or turned into a legalism the opportunity to partake of the Holy Supper? We either had gotten into the rut of saying it should only be partaken of every so often as a matter of tradition, or we had gotten into the sloth of saying, "Ho-hum, another Sunday, another Service of the Sacrament." And, if there is a wonderful benefit to come out of the pain and struggle of this pandemic, is it not a renewed joy, a renewed cherishing, of the privilege and opportunity to come to the Lord's Table?

So then, in our eagerness, we are reminded that the Supper is not only a meal of God's love for us, but also a meal of our love for one another... not only a meal of God's patience toward us, but also a meal of our patience in thinking of one another.

These words that I cite - "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another" – these words are not words of mere table etiquette; but they are words of "*the Table*" etiquette. They are the words of St Paul, as he wraps up his instruction "of first importance", teaching and exhortation regarding the sacred nature of the Holy Supper, and intimately tied to that sacred meal is love and patience, one for another.

Such is not unique to Paul's understanding; after all, he conveyed to them "that which I received from the Lord Jesus Christ." And wasn't it that same Christ who had said in the Upper Room, "As I have loved you, so you also love one another." It's easy to get that one wrong – not only in our short-temperedness and self-centeredness, but also in understanding what it means to love one another. How many religious bodies pull out the bowl of water and go through their annual show of footwashing? Nothing wrong with that, but such a show is not the totality of true love to carry us through each day; rather, as Jesus gave to St Paul, and Paul handed down to us, "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." Think on one another. In true unity of the faith, rejoice that this is a meal of partaking together. No meal is it of

individual fellowship with Jesus, but rather of communal fellowship with fellow penitent, fellow followers of Jesus, fellow beneficiaries of his cross.

But the waiting for one another is no law of logistics, but rather a law of love – a law of love that understands the context of situations, the details that would require one of our brothers to be gone, while another of our brothers to be here... a love that laments when some *choose* to be away, and weeps for those who the situation *requires* to be away... and seeing the empty seat at the table, we pray for them, and they for us, and we together eagerly and longingly wait for and anticipate coming together with one another.

And so, those Christians around the world who partake this night are to do so thinking with love and patience and prayer for those who may not partake tonight. And those who may not ought rejoice with and offer prayers of thanksgiving on behalf of those who may.

Now, there is a second word of Christ we ought consider tonight on account of the unique situation. Like the first word, this, too, is not often heard on this Holy Thursday. But, unlike the first word, this word often *is* heard – perhaps with some misunderstanding – in many other setting and situations. That word?

Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

You all know that famous promise, but do you know from where in the Scriptures it comes? Isn't that context pretty important, that we might have proper assurances and wield this Word rightly?

This famous comfort comes from Matthew 18, the same chapter in which Jesus outlines how the Church is to deal with sin, with an erring brother, how to bring him to repentance and rejoice in his forgiveness – first one going to him, then – if he will not repent, bringing another and, if still no repentance, bringing it to the whole Church. And, in the very context of Jesus giving to the Church the “keys to the kingdom” – the authority to share the forgiveness of His sins – Jesus then reminds us that it is not merely us sharing it with one another, but rather such forgiveness is certainly true because “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Yes, the whole divine life can be bestowed by and upon the Church where it can only meet in little tiny pockets of believers... tiny parishes, tiny churches. No grand cathedrals and congregations of thousands? No problem. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them,” Jesus promises.

Yes, even *two or three*. This ought not be misused to comfort families of two and three that they're the Church while in isolation, while saying to the widow or bachelor, “No good news for you.” Rather, this is about the life of the *Church together*. Notice, not *one*: (Despite medieval history, where priests were paid by the people to

privately celebrate the Mass)... not one, that no priest/pastor is to celebrate the Supper by himself, while the rest of the Church goes on its way in daily life. No, the life of the Church, the life that is ours in Christ, the life of the new covenant, cannot be celebrated by one... it is, by definition, a life together. But, that means that when that one pastor brings the meal of the new covenant to a shut-in, or to two or three (or even to the one, because, together they are “two gathered together”) ...or when those sheltered-in-place come into the sunlight for an opportunity to partake, what joy that there Christ *is*, with all His power and authority, with all the benefits of the cross being poured out upon that little gathering. Christ does not withhold some of the benefits because the crowd size is too small; He doesn't decide not to show up because the small number isn't worth his time. Instead, in all his grace and favor and generosity, there He is in the midst of them.

And he's there “in the midst of them” not just in spirit, not just in thought, but in the authority of His Holy Word, in the power of forgiveness declared before the judgment seat of God, even in the profound mystery of his very body and blood. Now, here is the misunderstanding in this Scripture passage as it is often used: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” It is often used to simply declare his omnipresence (again, as if for the family of two or three, but not for the bachelor or widow); but His promise is most particularly true regarding the

means of grace and in His Holy Supper... that, even where only two or three can come to his altar, even where the Church is scattered throughout the world and cannot come to the altar in one massive throng, nevertheless, there in those *little* gatherings all the benefits of heaven are poured out for them.

Indeed, though the Supper was instituted and the Covenant given for the whole, universal Church of every time and place, to be forever united in the promises of that covenant, partaking of the one body, drinking from that one cup of blessing, nevertheless Jesus also instituted it knowing what would happen to those first representatives of the Church, how they would be scattered... he gave it knowing what would happen to the Church after the day of Pentecost and in the early years of persecution and catacombs and martyrdom. He instituted it knowing that His own Revelation given to John would describe the Church as the woman fleeing in the wilderness, being given a place of safety and respite prepared for her by God. Yes, Christ instituted this meal of unity knowing that the Church in any one time and place may look more like the diaspora – those scattered by persecution – than it would look like the Church “all gathered together in one place” on the day of Pentecost, with thousands being added to the glorious assembly.

Yes, knowing what the future would hold for His Church, Christ gave this meal of the covenant to strengthen and sustain us in the unity of faith and the promises of the covenant that time and

space and distance and suffering and persecution cannot overcome. Even when the Church is scattered by hardship, even when it is in hiding under the thumb of overbearing and poorly discerning government or pestering plague, even there Christ is there with His Church... and in each little gathering in every dark corner, where frightened sheep and lonely shepherd cling to His covenant, there is Christ the Good Shepherd, still safeguarding and keeping his sheep – every one of them as He knows them by name – and there He is proclaiming forth and effecting anew the promises of sustenance: “This is my body; This is my blood... they are for you; in every season and situation of life where two are three are gathered in my name, gathered in the safety of being baptized into my name, gathered in the faith of that baptism in my name, gathered with the plea and petition that calls upon my name to benefit from my name – Here I am in the midst of you: This is my body for you; this is my blood for you. It will keep you and sustain you unto life everlasting.”

Therefore, friends, we have every reason this night to rejoice in the Sacrament... for, though we cannot all be together for it, how is that any different than what the Church has always known? Though we cannot all be together for it, doesn't that simply mean this one loaf and the cup of blessing is fulfilling its purpose of forgiveness, strengthening, and *unity* it was instituted by Christ to give as His comfort for His *scattered* Church?

So, this day across the world, if you cannot today come and receive it, nevertheless thank God for it and pray with all fervor that you would be granted the hunger and thirst that will never ever again take for granted any opportunity to receive it. But also pray with joy and thanksgiving on behalf of all who can come and receive it this day, for the covenant remains forever; no calamity nor danger can overcome it; and so, the meal is as celebratory as always – for where two or three come to receive it, there the Church still gathers with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. There the Church still celebrates and is confirmed in the unity of fellowship known on earth and in heaven and throughout every time and place the Church has ever met. And there, the Church still – even where two or three are gathered – there the Church still dwells with her gracious Lord and Savior in his very body and blood, with the full certainty and comfort of forgiveness, life and salvation.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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