

A Reflection for Holy Thursday

God's Love: Undeserved, Unconditional, and Unifying

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Writing a reflection for Holy Thursday feels like a daunting task; this day in our Catholic tradition is so multi-faceted.

Abundant in symbolism and sacred tradition, Holy Thursday celebrates the institution of the Eucharist as Jesus' body and blood. It is on this day that the Chrism oil used in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and anointing of the sick is blessed. It also marks the end of Lent's almsgiving, fasting, and prayer, and the beginning of the Easter Triduum, when we contemplate Jesus' dying and rising for our sins and God's plan of redemption for the world.

Indeed, Holy Thursday is one of our holiest days. Yet on this day, I feel most drawn to ponder God's gift of undeserved, unconditional, and unifying love.

During the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrates this love. The Gospel says he rises from the table, takes a towel, and ties it around his waist (*Jn 13:4*). He then begins to wash the feet of his disciples, one by one. We know that Jesus humbled himself to share in our humanity, but in the washing of the feet — a task typically reserved for slaves — Jesus acts more intimate and self-humbling than ever before; an act far more significant than a simple show of kindness.

Contemplating the foot washing scene is not complete without also considering its backdrop. Jesus knows Judas will betray him and that, in the coming hours, each one of his closest friends will fail him. And so, Jesus is not surprised when Peter first refuses to have his feet washed. Peter is bewildered, unprepared to receive this generous act of love.

The disciples feel unworthy of Jesus unconditional love, but it is not theirs to deserve. Despite their shortfalls and inadequacies, Jesus freely gives them the gift of his love.

It is at this supper, in the presence of his closest companions, that Jesus offers himself as the Passover sacrifice. "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (*1 Cor 11:24-25*). Jesus gives his greatest gift in the sacrament of the Eucharist, a gift that makes us sharers in his body and blood, unified to form one single body.

The grace of Holy Thursday is knowing that God embraces us despite our weaknesses and imperfections. This is a lesson I need to learn in a personal way, but the reminder is a constant consolation in this work to end the death penalty. God meets our frailty with love, without judgement or exclusion. God's love is given to us without distinction. "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do (*Jn 13:15*)."

On this first day of the Triduum, we recognize God's unfailing gift of undeserved, unconditional, and unifying love for us. This love has the power to embolden every human heart and calls us to do the same. Let us ask for the grace to respond to God's call to love one another accordingly.