

Today is Holy Thursday, the beginning of the three most holy days in the Christian calendar, which we also call the Triduum. On Holy Thursday we celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper which commemorates the final Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples before he was betrayed and crucified for our sins.

It is a privilege for me to be able to speak to you today, since this Mass also celebrates the institution of the Eucharist, the institution of the Mass itself and the institution of the Priesthood, so it's not unusual that the pastor wants to preach on this special night, but Father Neil is not one to be selfish and so I have a chance to reflect on these mysteries with you here tonight.

It's easy to see how the last supper was the beginning of the Eucharist from the way Jesus turned the bread and wine into His Body and Blood. It's not always so simple to see how it was the beginning of the priesthood as well.

I think it's important to understand this, because it is one of the distinctive things about Catholic Christian teaching and practice that separates us from our Christian brothers and sisters of other faiths.

What is a Priest? From the earliest days of God's people, the role of the Priest was to offer sacrifice to God on behalf of the people and for the benefit of the people. Ever since Cain and Abel offered up sacrifices to God, it has been a natural part of our human nature to want to show God that we love him more than anything we possess.

When the first Passover resulted in the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, it was the descendants of Levi who stood firm for the Lord while the others were praying to the golden idol they made. Moses and Aaron were Levites.

So God rewarded them by making them the priests of the nation of Israel - but there was a price, because the Levites gave up their allotment of Land and lived among all the tribes, serving them, taking care of the Tabernacle of the Lord and offering sacrifice to God to atone for the people's sins.

Israel had Elders and Rabbis and Prophets and Kings, but the priests always held that special role. And yet, the Passover meal was not one which was presided over by a priest, but rather by the head of the family or leader of the group.

What made the last supper of Jesus such a special Passover was that it was no longer just a commemorative meal, but it became the ultimate sacrifice as well and so the presider becomes the priest. Jesus became a priest for His disciples because He offered the ultimate sacrifice, His own Body and Blood and gave His very own life to atone for our sins.

In the first Passover, a lamb was slaughtered and eaten, and its blood used as a sign to God that the house belonged to one of his people. In our modern Passover, the Mass,

Jesus is the Lamb who was slain and His Blood used as a sign that our sins had been washed away and that we belong to Him once more.

The Lord commanded that the Passover be celebrated on the same day every year forever! No exceptions, no excuses.

As Christians we have elevated the Passover meal to our celebration of the Mass and so our Passover is celebrated every moment of every day somewhere around the world in perpetual praise for our God. We also remember the special day of the original Passover on Holy Thursday in our Triduum but we live the Passover every day as a people.

But if you don't believe that Jesus turned the bread and wine into His real Body and Blood and if you don't believe that His commandment to "Do this in remembrance of me!" empowered His followers to do the same, then the Lord's supper is only a meal - and not a sacrifice, and so there is no need for a priest, and here is where we differ from so many other Christians who celebrate the Lord's supper once a year and have only Ministers, not priests, to teach and shepherd them.

We can be very happy on this solemn day that we continue to have Priests of God to serve us. Jesus showed how deep that service was by washing His disciples' feet. We can't really appreciate how significant that gesture was today, because we have lost this tradition - we all wear shoes.

But in those days, when guests would arrive from a trek through the dusty roads, the host would assign the lowliest servant to wash the dirt from the roads off their feet. A job reserved for the newest, the least educated, the man or woman with the lowest stature. So what Jesus did was more than just ceremonial, it was absolutely shocking. Jesus made it clear that the role of leader was to serve and sacrifice.

Our Priests today have sacrificed so much to serve us. Just as the Levites gave up their land and their inheritance, a Priest today gives up much of his freedom of choice of where he will serve, he gives up much of his family support network, he gives up the comfort and strength of a wife by his side, and all to be our servant. And unlike the Levites who inherited the role, a modern Priest gives this up willingly.

Though a Priest may give up their own family, still they hope to become part of our families in the broader sense of our Church and yet, how do we thank our Priests?

Sacrifice is out of fashion these days as we all seek to get what's coming to us, and there seems to be little respect available in the wider world. Our Priests come under attack as a whole group for the sins of the very few among them and they live under a cloud of suspicion from the very people they have sacrificed to serve.

How many of us let even a day go by without thinking about our children or parents and remembering them in our prayers and yet if our pastor is part of our family, shouldn't we remember him too, each and every day.

We expect them to listen to our troubles and pray for us but do we remember them when we leave the church? Do we take the time to write a note or send our thanks for everything they do?

In the last supper, Jesus made it possible for us to escape from sin just as surely as the original Passover made it possible for the Hebrews to escape from Slavery. He has given us the Priesthood so that we may have him with us in the Eucharist as our brother.

So on this special night, we say to you Father Neil, our Father, our brother, our friend, we thank you for helping to keep the doors of heaven open for us. We thank you and more importantly, for loving us as your own family, we love you too. God bless you.

Everybody say "Amen!"