Holy Thursday Saved in Hope Part 1

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“Spe salvi facti sumus, in hope we are saved, says St. Paul to the Romans”. This is the opening sentence of Pope Benedict’s encyclical “Saved in Hope”. I thought for the Triduum this year I would include some pearls of wisdom from this encyclical. We begin the Holy Triduum tonight. We commemorate the Last Supper this evening which concludes with Jesus’ arrest. Tomorrow night the liturgy continues as we commemorate the crucifixion and passion of our Lord. Our liturgy concludes Saturday night with the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. Last weekend, I suggested that Holy Week is medicine for the soul. Pope Benedict suggests that the medicine Christianity offers us is essentially “hope”. And this medicine isn’t just for you and me as individuals; it is the Divine Doctor’s prescription for the whole world.

Pope Benedict reminds us of how St. Paul spent his ministry reaching out to gentiles who either did not believe in God or who were following polytheistic systems where the deities cared very little about the affairs of the lives of human beings or our future. A common saying epitomizing life in those days was, “how quickly we fall back from nothing to nothing”, which is a rather depressing thought. The distinguishing mark of someone without God or following false gods is that there isn’t any hope in the future other than eventual nothingness. And the truth is: many people in our culture today feel the same way if they are honest with themselves. Pope Benedict says the distinguishing mark of Christians is that we have a future. We do not know necessarily all the details of our future but we know that our lives do not end with emptiness. This hope in the future, that we have a future, has an immediate effect on how we live in the present which is distinct from those who do not have this hope, he argues.

Pope Benedict suggests that Christianity is therefore not only “informative”, giving us knowledge of who we are, where we come from and where we are going; Christianity is also “performative”. The future hope Christ offers us has an immediate performative effect on our thoughts, words and actions in the here and now. We see and act in the world differently because we are a people who have given hope. “Spe salvi facti sumus, in hope we are saved”.

What does this performative aspect of Christianity look like in context of our liturgy this evening? The Gospel says, “…during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, Jesus rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist.” The scene is so shocking we had an artist depict this moment on our altar here. The omnipotent God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ kneels down in the dust before his creation and humbly washes our feet. For an ancient theologian, it
would be unthinkable that God would do this. It would be a scandal to suggest it. It doesn’t make any sense until we connect this action with Jesus’ words with the bread and the wine during the Last Supper, “Do this in remembrance of me”. Jesus demonstrates what Holy Orders, consecrated life and lay ministry ought to look like in his Church. Jesus demonstrates what the lives of anyone who is baptized ought to look like.

For someone with no hope in the future, the symbol of washing feet can be categorized anywhere from “well, that seems like a nice thing to do” to “that doesn’t make any sense at all”. For someone with the hope Jesus offers us for the future, we are given a glimpse into what heaven looks like and therefore how the world could look like if everyone followed Jesus’ example. The world Jesus offers us is a much better world than the one we see in the news each day and it is medicine for our relationships at home, work or school, or wherever we find ourselves. The hope Jesus offers us in the future has a direct impact on the here and now and this hope is not limited to “me”. This hope is a gift offered to the whole world and this has a significant ramification on how we perceive our discipleship.

To reflect on this, it is interesting in our culture how over the years religion and spirituality in general have become recognized more so as an individual pursuit than a community pursuit. The gist of this seems to be a general belief that spirituality is more about “me” than “we” in a way people in ancient times would not have understood. For instance, a common perspective I hear from a number of people is how they consider themselves more spiritual than religious, drawing a distinction between the two. I think we have all heard this statement before from someone we love and I understand the perspective. Everything in our culture is geared towards individualism, self-actualization, and so forth. We are consumers. It is the basis of our economy to consume, focusing more so on what I want for myself, not only materially, but also politically and spiritually. This can also explain how participating in the faith life of our family or of a parish community for that matter can be considered more and more an optional activity, provided it is something that fits into my schedule and something I want to do.

Pope Benedict recognized this societal trend. We are more and more a “me” society than a “we” society and this is having an impact on people’s spiritual journeys. Pope Benedict suggests, when we stop to pray and think about how Jesus died for “all”, which includes me, however, Jesus died for all…to live for Jesus means allowing ourselves to be drawn into his “being for others.” Authentic Christianity draws us out from ourselves into Jesus’ “being for others”.

How do we allow ourselves to be drawn into Jesus’ “being for others”? On Holy Thursday, Jesus institutes the Eucharist by becoming fully present to us in the form of bread and wine. When we receive Christ into our hearts we are to become Christ to others. The Eucharist is medicine for the soul by inviting us to become what we eat. The Eucharist draws us out of our individualism and
welcomes us more fully into the Body of Christ. This is why we also call the reception of Eucharist “communion”. Communion comes from the word “communio”, which is also where the word “community” comes from. The Eucharist welcomes us into the communion of saints, the Body of Christ, the Church. The Eucharist is given by Jesus to “me” so I can move more deeply into the concept of “we”. The hope for the future Jesus offers us is a hope offered to the world. As disciples of Jesus, we are to be emissaries of this hope.

The dramatic action Jesus takes of washing our feet and commanding us to do likewise underscore this. Life is ultimately not about “me” but about “we”. Usually, after the homily, our tradition in our parish is to demonstrate the washing of feet. It is an optional practice for this liturgy and a good one. As many of you know, I am still recovering from a recent illness and I am on doctor’s orders to take it easy. And so, at this time I simply invite us to reflect on what the symbol of Jesus washing our feet and commanding us to do likewise means for you right now, at home, at work or school, here in the parish, community or world. What does this movement from “me” to “we” look like for you in your own spiritual walk? “Spe salvi facti sumus, in hope we are saved”. We do not believe our lives come from nothingness and return to nothingness. The distinguishing mark of a Christian is that we have hope in a future. This makes Christianity not only informative but performative. Our identity as Christians can have an impact on our lives and therefore our relationships, community, and world here and now. This is all possible because we recognize, no matter what we are going through right now, our future is full of hope through Christ our Lord. Amen.