

Holy Thursday 2020 “Saved in Hope Revisited Part I”

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The Holy Triduum begins tonight, the holy three day, a sacred story that articulates why Christians are defined by hope. 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. Holy Week is medicine for the soul, perhaps this year more than ever.

“Spe salvi facti sumus, in hope we are saved. This is the opening sentence of Pope Benedict’s encyclical “Saved in Hope” quoting St. Paul to the Romans. I thought for the Triduum this year I would revisit some pearls of wisdom from this encyclical. I am reading it in a new way in light of the times we live in. You see, 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 God’s prescription for the whole world. We need it now more than ever.

For those without God, especially in the times we live in, it is easy to come to an observation, “how quickly we fall back from nothing to nothing”. I imagine there were moments this past month when we were shocked at how quickly the world can fall apart. The freedoms we took for granted as permanent in the world, like something as simple and wonderful as the freedom to gather as family and community, these can be taken away so rapidly. If we live our life without God or follows false gods, then we can only conclude that there isn’t any hope in the future. In the end, all we would be waiting for is nothingness. This is why Pope Benedict is saying something quite profound when he says the distinguishing mark of Christians is that we have a future. This hope in the future, that we have a future, has an immediate effect on how we live in the present moment, however difficult it is, in a way that is distinct from those who do not have hope.

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 been given hope. 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.” Let’s reflect on this for a moment. The omnipotent God incarnate kneels down in the dust before his creation and humbly

washes our feet. For theologians of Jesus' day, this would have been unthinkable. It would have been a scandal to suggest it. It doesn't make any sense until we connect this action with Jesus' words from the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me". Jesus demonstrates on Holy Thursday what ministry should look like in his Church, from priest to pew. It looks like washing feet.

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 "How is that practicing social distance?" For someone with the hope Jesus offers us in the future, his example gives us a glimpse into what heaven looks like. And even if social distancing is the right thing to do now, as Christians we must still find other ways to wash other people's feet in these days. Why is that? This is because, as disciples of Jesus, we know this world has a future. And, a world that looks like everyone lovingly washing each other's feet is a much better world than one where people are socially distant.

The symbol of washing feet and the symbol of feeding each other are reminders that we are all in this together. Pope Benedict suggests, we should take some time to pray and think about how Jesus died for "all". If 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 what looks like 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 emissaries of that hope.

The dramatic action Jesus takes on the evening of the Last Supper 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. We obviously can't do that this year. Maybe you would like to do this at home? Or maybe we can simply reflect on what the symbol of Jesus washing our feet and commanding us to do likewise means for us right now, at home, in our different relationships at home, with our neighbors, our community and world. What does this movement from "me" to "we" look like for us in our own spiritual walk? We all understand the need for social distance in the moment. We must take care to ensure that at the end of this pandemic, we remember how to socially embrace each other. We cannot forget how to do that.

How do we get there? “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 the 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 even in the midst of profound hardship. No matter what we are going through right now, no matter how dark the days ahead might get, the Triduum proclaims defiantly that our future is filled with hope through Christ our Lord. Amen.