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FOR THEM DO I PRAY

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THE LAST SUPPER



HOUGH THE SUN had set some hours before, the remains of the simple meal had not been removed from the table. There was a softness of spring in the night air; an occasional cry rose from the lane below, a murmur from the streets, then quiet again as the city settled for the night's rest. Within the room the group of men barely visible in the uncertain light of oil lamps had none of the carefree mood of banqueters. How could they have? The tides of wonder, joy and sorrow, horror and supreme exaltation that had been sweeping through the room had left them stirred to the depths of their being, as uprooted, tossed and turned about as trees in a flood. Only one was serene; He was the Master Who had led them through the last three years of struggle, Who now stood among them, moving them with hope and fear, great promise and disquieting prophecy, pouring out on them the last and overwhelming words of divine farewell.

For three years He had been stirring them and all Israel, working signs and miracles with the power of God, speaking as none had spoken since Moses had come down from Sinai, speaking as Moses himself had not dared to speak. His words had opened their minds to sudden light and understanding, had called from their hearts the response of deepest love and adoration, and yet—had He not again and again lifted His voice in other words, strange and incomprehensible, words that a man could hardly accept, if the speaker were not in truth the Son of God? Now the

last evening had come, and the Son of Man was signing and sealing His work among men with words and deeds that would live in commemoration forever. The twelve men whom He had chosen sat and looked and listened to the Son of God.

There had been nothing beforehand to suggest that this evening was one set apart and forever consecrated. True enough, the situation was getting so tense in Jerusalem that the crisis could not be long delayed, but on this night, it seemed, they would only gather quietly, as was their custom, to celebrate the paschal meal together. It would be another evening to rest in the presence of the Lord, to listen and learn of the kingdom of God.

When did they understand that this was no ordinary night? Was He more silent, more grave and deliberate when they began to eat? We do not know, but surely they had some awareness, some foreknowledge of the imminent mystery and revelation before He rose and took the bread and blessed it and broke and gave it to them, and said, "Take ye and eat. This is my body." (Matt. 26, 26) Then taking the chalice of wine, He gave thanks and gave to them, saying: "Drink ye all of this. For this is my blood of the new testament, which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins." (Matt. 26, 27-28) Then: "Do this," He said, "for a commemoration of me." (Luke 22, 19) And the moment had come and gone. The institution of the Eucharist had taken its place in history. The first priests of the New Law had been ordained.

Before another sun had set these men would be stricken by the horror of the Cross, but now at this moment they were united by these words, irrevocable and forever, to the fate of the Crucified, His friends, His apostles, His priests. But before they went out to meet their fear and defeat, He had much to do: to teach and strengthen them for the dark hours before the Resurrection. He moved quickly with His plans.

Stooping, the Son of God washed their feet. It was a simple lesson, yet deeply disturbing to these sons of Abraham who had worshipped all their lives that One Creator Who is Infinite and Eternal, and awesome in majesty—no Israelite dared even to whisper His true name. The Son of Him should not be kneeling before them, pouring water on their feet and drying them with His towel! Peter was bewildered and protested. It was an unavailing protest, and the Lord had His way. His calm words

drove home the truth He was teaching them: "If I then being your Lord and Master have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13, 14) Then, almost before the lesson in humility had been fully understood, a chill of horror was felt throughout the room. "One of you," He said, "shall betray me." (John 13, 21) One would betray Him? Yes, and more than this: "All you shall be scandalized in me this night." (Matt. 26, 31) Peter recovered first: "Lord . . . I will lay down my life for thee." The infinitely sad words came from the Savior's lips: "Wilt thou lay down thy life for me? Amen, amen I say to thee . . . thou shalt deny me thrice." (John 13, 36-38)

Bewilderment and horror and sorrow—were these all He had to give to those who would see Him crucified the next day? He would have to give strength and hope, great words of joy and promise; He would have to ease the pain in their hearts before He left them on this night. These were the ones He loved, who trusted Him and relied on His strength, and He could not leave them thus. So He spoke on long into the night, in words like chords of mighty music, in parables like sweet and powerful poetry, revealing to them the mysteries that dwelt in the God-head before the creation of the world: of His eternal love for the Father, and of the Father's love for Him, and how they dwelt as One, and of the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, Who was their very love. He spoke to them of the secret of all human joy, the love that would exist between them when He and the Father came and dwelt in them, and the Holy Ghost descended upon them. He spoke on, of the victory He would accomplish over the powers of the world, and of the kingdom in which they would all reign, an eternal kingdom where He dwelt with the Father, never to be separated from Him, and where they would dwell with Him, in the glory that was His before the creation of the world. They would love one another as He had loved them, and in this bond of love, all of them would reach eternal glory; and then He blessed them and gave them peace. "Peace I leave with you: my peace I give unto you . . . Let not your heart be troubled," (John 14, 27) He said, and His peace descended upon them.

And so He taught them the powerful and tender truths, that they might be strengthened and comforted and bear the hard and bitter truths, and so have the fullness of truth, and not be crushed by it. In the end, when He had raised their hearts with words of exhortation, He confirmed and consoled them with a

prayer. In His prayer He left the record of His desires, the tracing of His Divine Will to be accomplished in all the succeeding generations of His priesthood.

HIS PARTING PRAYER

He prayed first for Himself, and then for His priests, and then for all who would believe in Him. He prayed for Himself, not because He needed prayers, for He is God, but for an example and a consolation to His apostles. Hearing Him pray, they would see again who He was. "Father," He prayed, "the hour is come. Glorify thy Son, that thy Son may glorify thee. . . . I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." (John 17, 1) Father, glorify thy Son. Glorify Him in His Passion on the Cross, when He overcomes and destroys the power of Satan, and by His total obedience atones for the first disobedience of Adam and the endless, weary multitude of hollow revolts by which men have dishonored Thee since the beginning. Glorify Him in His Resurrection, when He shall be the first to conquer death and rise immortal, the first of the glorious armies of the saints to cross the infinite distance between God and man, to dwell with God. Glorify Him in the hearts of all the Christians who will believe in His Name in later times and, following Him through life and death and resurrection, forever call Him Savior. These are the glories of the Son of God made Man.

We learn the basic truth of Christian revelation. Only Christ has saved men's souls. Only He, God and Man, filled the infinite requirements of Divine Justice. All salvation is from Jesus Christ alone, sole, unique Redeemer of the world. What then of His priests; why did He ordain them if He alone is the Redeemer? Though Christ began and completed the Redemption of men, He willed not to work alone forever. He willed that other men join in with Him, becoming His ministers, the instruments of His grace and the channels of salvation. These men are, above all, His priests. Their glory is to share the work of Christ.

DIVINE TEACHING AND DIVINE GRACE

Christ accomplished His own work before the Ascension. "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." (John 17, 4) What then of the generations of sinners who would swarm across the earth for centuries after He had gone back to the Father? They were not forgotten. After the first part of His prayer

to the Father, in which He tells of His own glory, He passes on to speak of the whole plan of redemption. "I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou hast given me out of the world . . . the words which thou gavest me, I have given to them. And they have received them . . . and they have believed." (John 17, 6) So Christ continued in His prayer. The infinitely precious words of redemption did not go back to heaven with Christ, but were left on earth in the keeping of those men whom He had chosen and who believed in Him. All the truths by which men live, the words that release from sin and sorrow and death, were committed to their care, to be guarded as treasures beyond price, and passed on with infinite care from generation to generation, zealously preserved unmingled and pure, and fiercely defended, infallibly interpreted, universally preached, for the joy and strength and salvation of countless multitudes—this is what is called the deposit of divine revelation. This was given into the hands of His priests.

It was preached on Pentecost Sunday; it was carried over Roman roads beyond the limits of the western world, whispered in slave mines, chanted in catacombs, passed from mouth to mouth openly and secretly, until the great day when the Roman Emperor himself professed his faith. Then a thousand years of glorious history for these truths about Jesus Christ, when they were the touchstones of western history; when sermon, dialectic, demonstration, persuasion, poetry, song, all arts, all powers of tongue and pen were poured out at their service. They were defended in treatise and in blood, with anathema and sword; they were never forgotten, never tainted, never diminished or increased, but kept always single and whole and pure, a spiritual thing. Twenty centuries later they are still alive, preached in cathedrals and chapels, taught in school rooms, on street corners, in lonely missions, broadcast over radios, whispered in prison camps, written in books, sung in songs, carved in stone, printed in hearts. And all this has been largely the work of priests.

Then, when men's minds were prepared by the truth, God ordained that new graces should follow, the graces of birth and growth and strength in a new supernatural life. When men do not blind themselves, God gives them grace to believe, to ask for and receive the water of Baptism, poured while the tremendous words are spoken: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Another soul is born into the household of God. It grows and needs strengthening for

battle, and so man is signed with the sign of the Cross and confirmed with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the same Holy Trinity. In his struggle with the world, the flesh and the devil, man falls; he can be wounded and even die. Then in confession healing is granted, or life itself from the dead, to the sound of the holy words: "I absolve thee." When the children of men marry and are given in marriage, uniting their lives in unbreakable bonds, for mutual help and the very life and continuance of the race, new sacramental graces are ordained to render the union holy in God's sight. And when the death of the body is imminent, still another grace is offered, to steady the soul through the final storms. But that the power itself to administer these sacraments should not disappear from the earth, a sixth sacrament is given, wherein by the laying on of hands the priests of Christ ordain new priests, and so maintain an unbroken spiritual succession through the births and deaths of mortal generations. Lastly, and greatest of all, the Lord chose to dwell among men, hidden under the appearances of bread and wine, present in body and blood and soul and divinity, close to the members of His Church, and ready to enter into communion with them daily.

What words can adequately contain the story of these quiet and measureless forces that have been flowing through the lives of men for twenty centuries, the marvelously ordered workings of sacramental grace? It is enough to repeat with the Book of Wisdom that God's wisdom "reacheth from end to end mightily and ordereth all things sweetly." (Wisdom 8, 1) This He willed to be, above all, the work of the priesthood. Some of the sacramental graces are in the power of all the faithful; some are limited to those few who have the fullness of priesthood, the bishops. The vastly greater part, in right and in fact, is the labor of the priest, his reason for being and his glory.

Thus Christ in His prayer revealed His glory, both that which would come to Him in His own Passion, and that which would be His as the plan of salvation unfolded in time. He revealed the glory His priests would offer Him, but He foresaw troubles. Therefore He prayed for them.

HIS PRAYER FOR PRIESTS

"I pray for them. I pray not for the world, but for them whom thou hast given me." (John 17, 9) He did not pray for the world because He knew that all the devices the world would

invent for its own salvation were doomed to fail from the beginning. Only His own plan of salvation would succeed, and this His priests would accomplish. So He prayed for them, and for this reason: because "these are in the world, and I come to thee." (John 17, 11) He would go to the Father and leave them. They could no longer turn to Him for advice and encouragement, to receive His word of approval or correction. Moreover, they would be in an unfriendly world; and this Christ prophesied: "the world hath hated them: because they are not of the world, as I also am not of the world." (John 17, 14) They would not join in the world's schemes. They would oppose the schemes, rebuke the schemers, reproach their followers, and be hated for it.

Yet Christ did not wish to lift them out of the world, to transport them to some safer place. "I pray not that thou shouldst keep them from evil." (John 17, 15) If they were taken out of the world, how could they save those who were sincere in heart, seeking the truth yet deceived by false prophets? Christ wished them to remain in the world to continue their work, but He also wished them preserved from evil.

From what evil did He wish them preserved? From all evil? By no means. He would permit them to be afflicted by myriad evils, by all suffering and persecution, by the fire, sword and rack, by crosses and gallows, by the headman's axe and the stake. They would fall under hunger and thirst, heat and cold, nakedness, scourging and shipwreck. Their lot was labor and struggle with weariness and disappointment and failure: from without—contempt and calumny or slander and dishonor, lies, thefts, curses and reviling; from within—all the common weaknesses of men, the ignorance and forgetfulness of the mind, the sudden onslaughts and stubborn rebellions of the passions, weakness in the will itself. Lameness, blindness, sickness, death were not spared them. They would know fear and uncertainty, loneliness, banishment, enslavement. No evil that falls to men was too much for His priests to bear; at no point would He say: "enough"—except to sin. From sin, from the coldness of heart and the betrayal of trust He prayed they be preserved.

"Sanctify them," He prayed, "in truth." (John 17, 17) Let them be clothed in holiness. Let them have unswerving faith and unconquerable hope. Let them master those dual qualities of mind and heart that seem irreconcilable; let them possess them in simplicity like the simplicity of God. Let them have childlike faith and vigorous understanding, meekness and humility with a

burning zeal, austerity and cheerfulness, careful prudence with absolute confidence in God's providence. In one act let them grieve over sin and rejoice in pardon, deal out justice and again mercy. Let them ceaselessly strive to become perfect and quietly wait for God to perfect them. In one movement may they be completely detached and deeply concerned with the business of the world. May they rigorously follow the law of God and yet be all things to all men. May their purity be like that of the Mother of God. Above all, in all they think and say and do, let them be moved by divine charity, patient, kind, envying none, not dealing perversely, not puffed up or ambitious, not seeking their own or provoked to anger, thinking no evil but always rejoicing in truth.¹ So Christ willed His priests to be—

Then He continued His prayer: "And not for them only do I pray, but for them also who through their word shall believe in me." (John 17, 20) Christ does not separate the preacher from the hearer; He included them together in His prayer for their salvation, showing that His one intention is the salvation of all men. And then He concluded His prayer. He gave again the ultimate, all-sufficient reason for which He had come on earth, taught, labored and suffered, for which also He would die. "As thou, Father, in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us." (John 17, 21) For this is the salvation of Jesus Christ, that those who believe in Him and do His Will may be united through Him to the Holy Trinity in unbroken communion of understanding and love in eternity.

"When Jesus had said these things, he went forth with his disciples." (John 18, 1) He went forth to His death, leaving the Church in the hands of His priests.

This prayer of Christ is our prayer for the newly ordained brethren of St. Joseph's and St. Albert's Provinces. We extend also to their families and friends our sincere congratulations that out of their midst Christ has chosen the dispensers of His mysteries.

"Holy Father, keep them in Thy Name." (John 17, 11)

¹ See I. Cor. 13, 4-6.