

## **HOLY THURSDAY-2010: EVENING MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER**

(Exodus. 12: 1-8, 11-14; I Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-15)

*The Stole and the Towel* is the title of a book, which sums up the message of the Italian bishop, Tony Bello, who died of cancer at the age of 58. On Maundy Thursday of 1993, while on his deathbed, he dictated a pastoral letter to the priests of his diocese. He called upon them to be bound by "the stole and the towel." The stole symbolizes union with Christ in the Eucharist, and the towel symbolizes union with humanity by service. The priest is called upon to be united with the Lord in the Eucharist and with the people as their servant. Today we celebrate the institution of both the Eucharist and the priesthood: the feast of "the stole and the towel," the feast of love and service.

On Holy Thursday we remember with gratitude the Paschal mystery of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the transformation of the Jewish Passover into the New Testament Passover. The Jewish Passover was, in fact, a joint celebration of two ancient thanksgiving celebrations. The descendants of Abel, who were shepherds, used to lead their sheep from the winter pastures to the summer pastures after the sacrificial offering to God of a lamb. They called this celebration the "*Passover*." On the other hand, the descendants of Cain, who were farmers, held a harvest festival called the *Massoth* in which they offered unleavened bread to God as an act of thanksgiving. The Passover feast of the Israelites (Exodus 12:26-37) was a harmonious combination of these two ancient feasts of thanksgiving, commanded by the Lord God and celebrated yearly by all Israelites to thank God for the miraculous liberation of their ancestors from Egypt and their exodus to the Promised Land.

Jesus' transformation of his last *Seder meal (Last Supper)* into the first Eucharistic celebration is described for us in today's *Second reading and gospel*. Jesus began his Passover celebration by washing the feet of his disciples as a lesson in humble service (foot washing was the duty of pagan slaves and even the Jewish slaves were exempted from it). He followed the ritual of the Jewish Passover meal up to the second cup of wine. Instead of serving the roasted lamb as a third step, Jesus offered his own body and blood as food and drink under the appearances of bread and wine. Thus he instituted the Holy Eucharist as the sign and reality of God's perpetual presence with His people as their living, heavenly food. This was followed by the institution of the priesthood with the command, "*Do this in memory of me.*" Jesus concluded the ceremony with a long speech incorporating his command of love: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" Thus Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist at a private Passover meal with his disciples (Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 21:7-23). He served as both the Host and the victim of a sacrifice. He became the *Lamb of God*, as John the Baptist had previously predicted (John 1:29, 36), *who would take away the sins of the world.*

The transformation of Jesus' Passover into the Holy Mass: The early Jewish Christians converted the Jewish "*Sabbath Love Feast*" of Fridays and Saturdays (the Sabbath), into the "*Memorial Last Supper Meal*" of Jesus on Sundays. The celebration consisted of praising and worshipping God by singing psalms, reading the Old Testament Messianic prophecies and listening to the teachings of Jesus as explained by an apostle or by an ordained minister. This was followed by an offertory procession bringing to the altar the bread and wine to be consecrated and covered dishes (meals) brought by each family for a shared common meal after the Eucharistic celebration. Then the ordained minister said the "institution narrative" over the bread and wine and all the participants received the *consecrated* bread and wine, the *living body and blood of the crucified and risen Jesus*. This ritual finally evolved into the present day Holy Mass in various rites incorporating various cultural elements of worship and rituals.

A loving invitation for sacrificial sharing and self-giving love. Let us imitate the self-giving model of Jesus who shares with us his own body and blood and who enriches us with his Real Presence in the Holy Eucharist. It is by sharing our blessings - our talents, time, health and wealth - with others that we become true Disciples of Christ who obey his new commandment: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*"