

Holy Thursday

18th April 2019

'Witnesses to the Real Presence'

Ex 12: the Passover instructions Ps 115: *the cup of salvation I will raise*

1Cor 11: *this is what I received and in turn passed on to you ...*

Jn 13: 1–15: *if I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.*

I read today an article by a former BBC News reporter, who, commenting on the coverage of Monday's fire at Notre Dame cathedral, said this: "it really was a remarkable feat for BBC1's *News at Ten* ... to get through the entire programme without a single mention of any of these words: Christian; Christianity; Catholic; worship; worshippers; sacred; Mass; Holy Week." I contrast this with an interview on a French channel with the Priest, Fr Jean-Marc Fournier, chaplain to the Paris firefighters. In his reporting of the events of that night, he gave proud and public testimony to his part in the work of the emergency services. It fell to him — as he stated — to save the Blessed Sacrament from the Cathedral tabernacle, and to save the holy relic believed to include elements of Christ's Crown of Thorns. What was most moving in his powerful words was not his bravery — along with all the firefighters — in entering the burning building with the risks involved in the flaming timbers coming down on them, but the words he used to describe what it meant to make sure that the Blessed Sacrament was made safe. He referred repeatedly the *real presence* of Jesus, and said how

we could not imagine without horror Our Blessed Lord Jesus consumed by the flames, any more than we would hesitate to save a human person from a burning building. Just as would risk our lives to save a loved one from a house fire, so we would risk our lives to preserve the Blessed Sacrament from the cathedral fire, for Jesus is the one we love above all others.

On this holy Day of Maundy Thursday, as we commemorate the Lord's giving this great Sacrament to the Church at the Last Supper, we acknowledge this truth: that what the Lord Jesus gave to us, His Church, that Thursday night, is truly Himself, truly Jesus ... So that, in fact, He could give no greater gift than this. St Jean-Marie Vianney, the renowned French parish priest of Ars, captured this in one of his most famous sayings: "There is nothing so great as the Eucharist. If God had something more precious, He would have given it to us."

In this holy Sacrament is His holy sacrifice; His spiritual nourishment; and His divine presence. The Eucharist sums up and contains, then, so much of what we need to live a holy Christian life. After Baptism it is the most precious Sacrament for our daily lives, so that we can

be freed from our sins (sacrifice); nourished in grace (food of our souls); and consoled by knowing He abides permanently here in the tabernacle (real presence). How divine and majestic that in such an apparently simple way, using the pre-planned elements of the Passover supper (unleavened bread, and wine) Jesus could give us all these gifts, in fact His very self.

This holy night as we begin together the accompaniment of Jesus into the sacred days of the Easter Triduum, we rejoice to be present at Mass — as we should rejoice and give thanks at every single Mass — and that we are with the living Lord. He saves us, He feeds us, He is with us — what more could we want? We pray, as we commemorate the Last Supper and the First Mass, that we may never take the holy Eucharist for granted, but that we should each week, each year, grow in greater and greater love for the Lord's gift to us in the Blessed Sacrament. Would that each one of us could give heartfelt and clear testimony to the earth-shattering meaning of the Eucharist, as did that firefighters' chaplain in Paris. When we speak

of the Mass to others, when we go to Mass even in the face of others' criticism, when we attend Mass wherever we find ourselves, each and every Sunday, when we are challenged as to the meaning and the importance of Mass, then we can give that testimony. The Mass is Jesus; so how could we neglect Him, or be away from Him? We can have the faith of the Church's true believers that would mean walking into a burning building to rescue the Lord from the tabernacle. This is within our grasp — this is not the faith of a few saints; this is the faith of each and every believing Catholic. Tonight as we keep this holy feast, and as we walk with Jesus to the Altar of Repose to keep prayer vigil with Him as He enters the sufferings of Good Friday, let's pray for the growth in love for Jesus in the Eucharist that will keep us faithful to the Mass to our dying day. He can give us this gift, for He wishes it, that we are with Him always embraced by the divine love that offered us His life, on the Cross and equally in the Mass.