

Holy Thursday 2023, Ballarat Cathedral

On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul last year, Pope Francis published a letter with some reflections on the liturgy. He began by quoting the words of Jesus at the beginning of the Last Supper. As Jesus met with his disciples on the night before he died, he said, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” (Luke 22:15)

Pope Francis speaks of Jesus earnestly desiring to celebrate that Supper with his first disciples. The Pope also speaks of Jesus earnestly desiring to celebrate the liturgy with us. Just as Jesus longed to celebrate the Last Supper with his disciples before he died, so he longs to celebrate the Eucharist with us in our time. The initiative comes from Jesus. He wishes to celebrate the Eucharist with us and he invites us to join him in the celebration. Whenever we celebrate the liturgy, as we’re doing this evening, we’re really responding to Jesus’ invitation to come and celebrate with him.

Another point that Pope Francis highlights is that the liturgy enables us to meet Jesus in a personal way. When we take part in the Mass, we’re responding to a personal invitation from Jesus and we’re encountering him person to person.

Pope Francis writes, “The Liturgy guarantees for us the possibility of such an encounter. For us a vague memory of the Last Supper would do no good. We need to be present at that Supper, to be able to hear his voice, to eat his Body and to drink his Blood. We need Him. In the Eucharist and in all the sacraments, we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus. His every word, his every gesture, glance and feeling reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments.”

Then Pope Francis recalls some of the people we read of in the gospels who met Jesus in person. We’re like those people in the gospel because we too can meet Jesus in a personal way in the liturgy. Pope Francis writes, “I am Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the paralytic in the house of Peter, the daughter of Jairus, the blind man of Jericho, Zacchaeus, Lazarus, the thief and Peter both pardoned. The Lord Jesus who dies no more continues to pardon us, to heal us, to save us with the power of the sacraments.” (par 11)

As we gather for Mass this evening, we’re like the people who gathered around Jesus in the gospels to listen to his teaching. We’re like the disciples who gathered with him in the upper room to celebrate the Last Supper. Through the Mass we draw near to Jesus. As we listen to the Scriptures, we hear his teaching. As we come to the altar, we share a sacred supper with him. He offers himself under the form of bread and wine to be our food for the journey.

The gospels tell us that Jesus gave two great signs of his love at the Last Supper. He gave himself to be our food. He also washed the feet of the disciples. In ancient times, washing the feet was a gesture of welcoming guests. Jesus washes the feet of the disciples to welcome them to the supper. We now have the ceremony of washing the feet in imitation of what Jesus did. May this washing of the feet this evening speak to us of how Jesus wishes to welcome us to this Mass. May this washing speak to us of the personal love that Jesus has for each one of us. Through this Mass of Holy Thursday, may we come to appreciate more fully how much Jesus loves us and may we grow in our love for him.

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR