

## Holy Thursday 2007

Pope John Paul II was known, among many things, for his great love of young people, and for his great desire to foster vocations. In May of 2003, in Madrid, Spain, he said to the young people who had gathered to hear him “I was ordained a priest at the age of twenty-six. Fifty-six years have passed since then. Looking back, and remembering those years of my life, I can assure you that it is worth dedicating yourselves to the cause of Christ, and for love of Him, dedicating yourselves to the service of others. It is worth giving your lives for the Gospel and for your brothers and sisters!” The young people embraced his message, and echoed back his words, by chanting over and over again “It’s worth it! It’s worth it.” Thus wrote Pope John Paul in his memoir “Rise, let us be on our way”: “a young heart can understand the reckless love that is needed for total self-giving.”

Holy Thursday is the night when we celebrate in the Church the greatest act of “reckless love” that has ever been known to man. Certainly, Jesus showed the depth of his love on Good Friday when he offered his body on the cross and suffered death in order to gain redemption for us; but on Holy Thursday, we see the foremost example of what we could call reckless love. Love shown with almost disregard for the consequences to self; love which does not care what it invites upon the giver, so great is the affection for the recipient. On this night, Jesus took bread and wine, and pronounced it to be his Body and Blood. And then, most incredibly, he did not guard it, did not keep it, did not protect it; he gave it away, placed Himself in the hands of his apostles. How reckless. And by instituting this ritual as a rite for all ages—do this in memory of me—he knew he would be placing his Body and Blood in the hands of all priests to come in the future—some devout, but some not, some striving for holiness, but some striving for power or acclaim, and not really caring about the Mystery which they held in their hands. Reckless. And he knew that he would be given to the faithful, whose understanding of the Mystery of which they would be partaking would vary in huge degrees; some would approach the communion rail fittingly, as though drawing near to their Savior as indeed they would be doing; others with a baffling nonchalance, as though this were still bread; and yet, still he would issue the invitation. And he knew that he would be at risk of falling into the hands of those who do not love him, some who might even despise him; more helpless in the Eucharist than he was even as a baby in man’s midst, he could even be reviled and abused. That is the depth of the love he shows man in the Blessed Sacrament; an unparalleled affection which we ponder this night.

We become so used to our Lord in the Eucharist—both in receiving his graces in Holy Communion, and in spending time in prayer before him in the Blessed Sacrament—that it's easy to, not necessarily take him for granted, but to not focus often enough on the enormity of his affection for us. In the institution of the priesthood he shows how deep his affection runs. So much does he desire to impart his graces to man, so much does he desire to draw us into his own life, that he entrusts mere men to minister in his name. To trust frail humanity to stand in his place, and be his hands extended over the penitent sinner, and to be his voice, pronouncing the words which announce his presence in the sacraments: this is incredible, and all done out of love. The priesthood comes with no guarantees of true devotion or even of competency; and yet, he loves his people so much that he will call from out of their midst a few unworthy men to be your servants. And this is why he washed the feet of his disciples, and why he calls upon pastors of his Church to perform the same ritual tonight. Because, just as it was for this that he came, it is for this that he calls. And indeed, this is probably the most challenging aspect of the ministerial priesthood. Not the confessions, or long hours, or celibacy even; but charity: to see so much of humanity as we do, and still to love the people of God, and not with our own affection, but rather with the affection of Christ: all-encompassing, unreserved, unfettered; reckless.

Vocations find meaning and significance in vows. A vow is sort of a crazy thing: it's a commitment to actions which will take place in the future, and take place in circumstances that cannot be foreseen, and take place with people whom we may not even know. I took a vow of obedience not just to Bishop Bruskewitz, but to all bishops to come after him until the end of my life; many of you took vows to spouses, but implicit in that was a promise to love your families as well, love children whom you couldn't possibly know, because they hadn't even been created. It takes courage to honestly take a vow, courage and a bit of wild abandonment. But living out a vow is possible, because God gives us the grace to do so; and he promises, not that living out our vows will make us happy always, or even happy necessarily, but that faithfulness to our vows will make us holy. Jesus didn't need a vow to become holy, since he is our source of holiness, and yet he nonetheless undertook the biggest commitment mankind has ever seen, and he remains committed to our salvation to this very day. And if anyone doubts the depth of his commitment, they need look no farther than his True Presence in the Eucharist.

As we face the challenges of faith: loving God, serving others, resisting sin, striving for virtue; as we deny ourselves pleasures, break away from pleasurable but unhealthy relationships, as we do that, it may be easy to ask ourselves at times if the payoff in the end is worth the costs along the way. May our answer mimic that of the students whom Pope John Paul II encountered in Madrid, whose rejoinder sums up our Lord's attitude towards the sacrifices he made for us: why give us his Body and Blood, why wash our feet, why carry the cross to Calvary, why die an agonizing death? Because that's how much he desires us to be saved. With every step that he took, with every breath that he drew, especially those last breaths he made struggling for air as he hung on the cross; with every bit of pain, he looked at fallen, weak, and otherwise helpless and hopeless man, looked upon us with his reckless love, and in essence said: "it's worth it. It's worth it."

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