

Reflections on John

Archbishop Naumann - Week 6



Deacon Bill Scholl:

Welcome to Enflaming Our Hearts with Eucharistic Amazement by Archbishop Joseph Naumann of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, a series of reflections on the Gospel of John as we contemplate our Lord's marvelous gift of Himself through the action of the Mass as Christ gives Himself to us in the Eucharist. (music)

Archbishop Joseph Naumann:

Dear friends, this is Archbishop Joseph Naumann and we're completing our reflections on the Eucharist. The first five, we walked through the sixth chapter of St. John's gospel, the famous bread of life discourse, and today, we're going to read from John, too, but now we're going to be in the 13th chapter. This is John's account of Holy Thursday night. This is the gospel that the Church has us read every Holy Thursday. It's John 13 verses 1 to 15:

"Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and He loved them to the end. The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over. So during the supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into His power and that He had come from God and was returning to God, He rose from the supper and took off His outer garments. He took a towel, tied it around His waist, then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dried them with a towel around His waist. He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, 'Master, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered and said to Him, 'What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.' Peter said to Him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.' Simon Peter said to Him, 'Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.' Jesus said to him, 'Whoever is bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over, so you are clean, but not all,' for He knew who would deny Him. 'For this reason,' He said, 'not all of you are clean.' So when He had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, He said to them, 'Do you realize what I've done for you? You call me teacher and master, and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I've given you a model to follow so that as I have done for you, you should also do.'" The Gospel of the Lord.

Well, friends, in John's gospel, unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when they talk about Holy Thursday night, they actually give us Jesus celebrating the First Eucharist and give us the words of institution. Paul, in one of his letters, echoes that as well. So that's very important. But John, when he describes Holy Thursday night, he focuses on this parable, if you will, that Jesus

uses as a homily to them at the First Eucharist because he's already given us the sixth chapter that we spent the last five weeks walking through, he's already given us the great teaching of Jesus on Himself as the bread of life. So the gospel that's chosen, and this is, I think, very fascinating in our liturgy on that night, when we celebrate the institution of the Eucharist, as well as the institution of the priesthood. The church presents us with this passage from John 13, with this famous episode where they're reclining at table and Jesus, we're told, takes off his outer garments, gets a towel and a basin and a pitcher of water and begins to go around the table to wash the feet of the apostles.

Now, in Jesus' time, many people walked barefoot. If they wore anything, they were these sandals, and they walked on these very dusty roads, and so their feet were pretty much a mess. It was considered unclean actually to touch the bottom of somebody else's feet because they were unclean. This was something that servants would do, slaves would do, but not someone that was a rabbi or a teacher would do, not someone who was the head of the household for his guest. There would be others that would do this really unpleasant job, if you will, of washing the feet of the guest. Jesus is doing something very radical here as He goes around the table, washes His disciples' feet.

He gets to Simon Peter, and Peter says, "No, you're not going to wash my feet." He's reacting to that this isn't right that my master and teacher should be washing my feet. Then Jesus says, "If I don't wash your feet, you will have no inheritance with me." So Peter, he's always kind of over the top in his reactions, he goes, "Well, wash my hands and my head as well," and Jesus said, "No, this'll do, just the feet is all that needs to be washed." But He makes this teaching that if you're going to be His disciple, that you have to have this humility and you have to be a man or woman of great service, of servant love to others. He's making this point to those that He will empower to celebrate the Eucharist and to hand down the Eucharist, those that will preside at the Eucharistic celebration, that if they're going to preside at that celebration, they especially, but all who received the Eucharist, this is true as well, that we must follow Jesus in this way of servant love.

So John's gospel gives us this beautiful teaching of Jesus to follow the master and to have intimacy with Jesus that the Eucharist allows us that as we were saying last week, it doesn't just bring us into proximity with Jesus, but Jesus enters into us and we're united with Him in this incredible way. Jesus gives us the Eucharist to nourish our faith, but to nourish us for what? To make His love real and alive in the world, and so we're called to be these servant leaders, these servant lovers, if you will.

The very first homily I ever gave as a transitional deacon. I had just been ordained a few days. One of the men in the class ahead of me who was ordained priest and asked me to preach at his first Mass, which I don't know why he chose to do that, but anyway, I remember one of the things I said in my homily at that first Mass, not knowing a lot at that point in my ordained ministry, but I said, "Well, today, the church has a new foot washer." In the priesthood, that's what we're called to be. It's not about honors and dignity. Jesus teaches in other parts of the gospel about this that if we're following Jesus because we want to be given honors and dignity

and win the respect and esteem of others, then we're not really following Him. That to follow Jesus means to follow Him in his path of heroic love, and of service love.

Of course, the Eucharist makes present for us what happens on Calvary, so Jesus, in giving us the Eucharist, gives us the means, yes, to receive the bread of the life, but He makes present for us the sacrifice of Calvary. We talk about the sacrifice of the Mass. Jesus invents this way, not only to make Himself present to us in this bread of life and this food to nourish our souls, but He makes present the amazing gift of Calvary in which Jesus shows the ultimate act of humility. I mean, this is more than washing feet. He allows Himself to be subjected to the cruelty of His passion. He allows Himself to be scourged and then to be forced to carry the cross. He allows Himself to die in this very ignominious way. He humbles Himself in this way so that you and I would know the depth of God's love. This is what God was willing to go through in order to communicate His desire for us to be in friendship with Him and communion with Him and that from that cross, blood and water would flow from the side of Jesus. If you remember in the Passion narrative, they go to break the bones and the legs of the others that were crucified. This was a way to speed up their death because they died from suffocation.

But when they come to Jesus, they say, "He's already dead, it's not necessary," which there's one of the Psalms that foretells us, "Not a bone of his will be broken." Instead, the Centurion throws the lance into His side and out of His side, blood and water come. What did they signify? They signify that from Calvary, Jesus is giving birth to the church, and so the water and the blood, they signify the sacramental life of the church. They signify baptism and blood signifies the Eucharist. Jesus comes to us to empower us to live this same love that He demonstrates in the most dramatic way at the Last Supper with the washing of the feet, but even more powerfully with the gift of his life on Calvary. This is again, when we go to Mass, that's made present to us, this sacrificial love of the Lord.

Just a few weeks ago, I interviewed Sohrab Ahmari about his most recent book, which is called *The Unbroken Thread*, but his previous book really talks about his conversion. Sohrab grew up in Iran and was raised as a Muslim, but he rejected, his parents, they probably weren't very devout. They were exposed to a certain amount of Western culture, they weren't real devout, but they sent him to school to learn the Quran. Sohrab rejected a lot of Islam as a child. He rebelled against it. But one of the things that he said was that he always was inspired was an account of some of the Muslim martyrs and a particular passage in the Quran where it speaks of this martyrdom. So Sohrab, he and his mother come to the United States, and he's really thrilled about this because he's been listening to Western music and seen Western movies and he dreams of going to New York, but they wind up in Utah of all places. He had an uncle that had already come and was in Utah. But anyway, he's lost his Islamic faith, he becomes basically an agnostic, maybe atheist. He begins to immerse himself in all of the unfortunate parts of American culture and seeks pleasure.

But as a young man in his 20s, he's despondent. He realized that his life is meaningless, he's not happy with what he's doing, he's wasting his life. I mean, he's succeeding materially, but he's finding no comfort in it. He is in New York. He is getting ready to take a train back to

Massachusetts where he is living at the time and he has got time to kill and he starts walking around the neighborhood of the train station and there's this Catholic church there. He decides for whatever reason to go in, and he comes in and Mass is actually just being celebrated. He sits there, he has no idea what's going on, and it gets to the part of the consecration. The priest holds up this white disc, he has no idea what it is, but he hears the words of consecration and it reminds him of the language about the Islamic martyrs. He realizes that something heroic is being proclaimed, that somebody's doing a heroic thing for others.

Of course, he would come to understand that this heroic sacrifice was being done by God Himself. He would eventually become a Christian and eventually convert to Catholicism. But I've always been struck by that, that he not knowing anything about Christianity or Catholicism or very little; he immediately understands that the Mass is about this sacrifice of this heroic love. If we understand that and we appreciate that, then as the Mass comes to its conclusion, of course we're always sent, we're told to go and glorify the Lord by our lives, or go and announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We're sent on mission at each and every Eucharist.

What is that mission? It's to bring this beautiful, self-sacrificing love, this humble servant love to the world for married people and to their marriages and to their families. Parents, they live this servant love as they take care of their children, but to bring it into the workplace, into our communities, into our friendships. That the call of the disciple that we become, this is the great miracle, that we become what we eat in the Eucharist and so we're called to be foot washers. I remember reading a book years ago that was based on the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of John and was called People of the Towel and the Water, and so we were called to be people that are foot washers, basically, if you want.

But we're willing to do whatever it takes to make the love of God that we have come to know and experience and receive, to make that real in the world. That Jesus comes to us to comfort us, to give us peace, but also to empower us to be these people that are on a mission to transform the world by His love. We see that in the early Christians, really what brought to people to the faith in their time, it wasn't so much the preaching of the apostles, it wasn't even some of the miracles that Jesus was able to work through some of the leaders in the early church, but it was seeing how these Christians love one another. That's what really transformed the world, when people began to see the way that Christians who believed in the Lord and were empowered by the Eucharist, how they lived their lives. Women were treated much differently, how marriage was esteemed, how life was held sacred, and that these Christians would risk their own lives to serve others. This is what the Eucharist is meant to be for us as well. As we conclude these reflections on the Eucharist, we conclude with this. Yes, the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, but it's also the source and summit of our mission. The Eucharist puts us on mission to take what we've received a very life of God and how He wants to take over us so that He can use us as instruments to bring His love to the world.

Dear friends, I hope that maybe these thoughts have been helpful to you. As a whole church here in the United States, we're beginning to embark on this three-year initiative to renew what John Paul referred to as Eucharistic amazement, to renew our wonder and awe of this precious

gift of the Lord that He gives to us in this sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of His body and blood. Dear friends, if you take anything away from this, just remember, what could be more important? What could possibly keep us, what could prevent us from coming to the Eucharist at least once a week, at least on the Lord's Day? For Catholics, the center of our week is to be Sunday and the center of Sunday is to be the Eucharist. So thanks for listening and God bless. May we be people of water and the towel, may we follow Jesus in this way of servant love of self-sacrificing love, may we transform the world with the love of Jesus Christ that's given to us in the Eucharist. Thanks for listening. God bless. (music)