

HOMILY – HOLY THURSDAY – 2010

In this homily for the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the first Mass, I will try to connect Civil War reenactments, video films, science fiction space travel, Shakespearean theater, the Passover and the Eucharist, which Jesus instituted this night almost 2000 years ago. Here goes.

With the 150th anniversary of the Civil War approaching next year, we will see especially in this area more and more Civil War reenactments. Now with these, and all historical reenactments, such as those of colonial Williamsburg and Puritan New England, we may ask why people try so much to do exactly what the people did and look exactly as people looked in a time now past. The reason is that, when they reenact the things as they were done before, they get a sense of bringing the past to life again, of joining with past ages. Of course, they cannot really bring the past as it was back, only an image. One cannot bring Generals Lee or Grant, or any of the soldiers who fought heroically at those battles, back from the dead; one cannot bring the patriotism and the dangers, the glory and the terror fully to the present. But there is a desire to overcome the barriers of time, to have the great events and civilizations present again, to unite the ages of the world together.

And likewise, when there are important events in our lives today, weddings and birthdays, graduations and travels, we often try to capture the moment on video or other cameras. Once again, there is the desire to break free of the barriers of time and to bring an event in the present into the future to be present again. Of course, once again, we cannot really accomplish this goal; the event itself does not return, only a sense of it. But we try to regain as much as possible the sense of these important events of family and friends by seeing them again reenacted on film. The desire cannot not fully satisfied, for time cannot fully be overcome, but the desire is there.

That desire to overcome that barrier of time is also reflected in modern science fiction novels about time travel from H.G. Wells [The Time Machine](#) to the present. For various philosophical that are too detailed for a homily, travelling back in time is impossible. The past is fixed; it cannot be changed without changing the present, which would make that very travel different. We are constantly travelling into the future. According to Einsteinian physics, may do so at different rates. But, on this earth that is the inevitable direction. And, when the future, we will not be able to travel back to what is now present. And yet there is that desire, expressed in so much literature, to see all the different ages of the world, all the cultures that have ever been and ever will be. Science fiction literature describes this desire, and a fictitious fulfillment, but cannot really satisfy it.

In literature and especially plays, as well as in music, there is to some degree a partial conquest over time. We think of the great plays in which the playwright, such as Shakespeare, speaks through the ages. As the actors and actresses speak his words, perform his directions, and carry out his vision on stage, to some degree he speaks again to future ages. To some degree, but not completely. He cannot fully be present. We

cannot bring Shakespeare, or Euripides, or Arthur Miller back from the dead, although they do to at some level speak to us again. The same is true of great musicians, whose presence we, to some degree feel, when their music is played again. But the unity must remain only a partial promise; they still belong to another time and space. Once again we satisfy, to some small degree, that desire to be united throughout the ages, but even that satisfaction increases our desire for true unity.

When Christ was born, the ancient Jewish Passover, which we heard about in the first reading, was the closest anyone could come to that satisfaction, for it was given by God Himself. In the Passover, the Jewish people renew that liberation from slavery, that re-establishment as the People of God, that God gave them through Moses about 3500 years ago. By carrying out the instructions God gave through Moses, the Jewish people become as present as they can to this most glorious event of their past. By eating the Passover lamb once again, they are symbolically at least united with Moses and the People of God throughout the ages. Symbolically united, but not fully so. For the Passover could not bring Moses, Aaron, Joshua, or any of those first liberated back from the dead. The plagues, fortunately perhaps, are not inflicted again; the liberation is partial, not complete. Once again, the ceremonies, especially those given by God, satisfy to some degree, the desire to bring the past present, the desire to unite the ages. But even that glorious liturgy gives only even that partial satisfaction that awakens a deeper desire for true unity of the best of all the ages, a desire that no human effort can fulfill.

Of course, nature does not create desires without a reason. At the end of all things on this earth, all ages will be united again before the final and eternal Jerusalem, beyond the suffering, decadence, and death of this earth. There, the best of every nation will be gathered together again, the wisdom and beauty of Greece, the stability and law of Rome, the chivalry of the medieval kingdoms, the order of heaven of ancient China, the mysticism of India and Ireland, the innovation and creativity under God of America, the wonders of nations long forgotten and nations not yet seen, all gathered together in mutual splendor and admiration, reflecting in thousands of ways the glory of God.

But God, like all good parents, all good teachers, all good leaders, wants to give us on this earth a first promise, a beginning of this final glory in heaven. And so, one time, one time for all time, Jesus did give that means of opening the gates of eternity, of overcoming the barriers of space and time, of uniting all peoples throughout history and throughout the world. For at every Mass we do what Jesus did at the Last Supper, at that First Mass so long ago; and thus the sacrifice of Christ on Good Friday is present to us and the Risen Christ comes to us. No mere image, but the reality of the greatest event of all time, that unites the family of God throughout time and space is not shown from a distance, but made present to us now. The great author of heaven and earth speaks, and His words, like the words of Creation, now spoken by the priest, make present to us greatest drama ever told, before which the greatest work of fiction pales, the salvation of mankind and the climax of human history. The laws of the Mass are, like the writings of a great playwright, indeed the great Author of heaven and earth, not a restriction, but rather the means of bring this great event, the death and Resurrection of Christ to us here and now as the Author joins with us in this drama. As we consume the new Lamb of

God, whose blood freed us from slavery to sin and death, we join with the people of God in every time and land, from the first Christians who were persecuted in Rome and redeemed that city, to the knights and ladies, monks and nuns of the Middle Ages, to the missionaries in far off lands, to the faithful who settled this land, and the faithful to Christians in a far off century that we cannot see. Christ allows all of His people to join together at the Cross and truly have Him present, now risen from the dead. He gave us this unity when He said almost 2000 years ago at that Last Supper, at that First Mass, over the bread and wine, "This is My Body . . . This is My Blood, given up for you. Do this in memory of Me."