

Holy Thursday 2013
Father Frank Matera
The Depth of His Loved

“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.”

With these words, St. John begins the account of Jesus’ Last Supper, and we begin our celebration of the Sacred Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. We begin the process of entering into the mystery of Christ’s saving-death and life-giving resurrection.

This Sacred Triduum is rooted in the Jewish feast of Passover, which celebrates Israel’s deliverance from slavery to freedom. By the annual celebration of Passover, Israel remembered that night when the Angel of the Lord destroyed the first born of the Egyptians, but passed over their homes because of the blood of the paschal lamb. *By the blood of that lamb*, Israel was saved. *By the blood of that lamb*, Israel was delivered from bondage. *By the blood of that lamb*, Israel entered into the Promised Land.

It was before this feast of Passover that Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to *pass over* from this world to his Father. *The hour had come* for Jesus to complete the work that the Father had sent him to do. *The hour had come* for Jesus to give the ancient feast of Passover a new and fuller meaning. And so Jesus, who had always loved his disciples, loved them to the end by becoming the new Passover Lamb, by whose blood we are saved.

To prepare his disciples for what he was about to do, Jesus washed their feet: the master takes the role of the slave; the teacher takes the place of the student; the sinless Son of God humbles himself before sinful humanity.

When Peter asks if Jesus is going to wash his feet, Jesus replies, “what I am going to do, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.” *By washing the feet to his disciples*—the work of a common slave—Jesus points to his death on the cross, the death of a common slave. *By washing his disciples’ feet*, Jesus points to the cleansing power of his death that will wash his disciples from their sins. *By washing his disciples’ feet*, Jesus points to his saving death as the paschal lamb by whose blood we are saved.

After he has washed the feet of his disciples, Jesus asks, “Do you realize what I have done for you?” *How could they ever understand* what Jesus has done for them? *How could we ever understand* what Jesus has done for us? *How could we ever understand the depth of his love? How could we ever understand* why the Son of God emptied himself for our sake?

And so Jesus explains what we cannot understand. He has given us an example to follow. By assuming the role of a slave, even though he is our Lord and Master, Jesus has shown us that the meaning of love is service to each other. By dying the death of a slave, the shameful death of crucifixion, Jesus has shown us the deepest meaning of love is to surrender our life for the sake of the other.

The Eucharist that we celebrate this evening is the embodiment of this love. The Eucharist we celebrate this evening is our Passover from death to life, from the slavery of sin to the freedom of God’s grace. Every time we celebrate this Eucharist, we proclaim the death of Christ until he comes again. Every time we celebrate this Eucharist, we enter into the mystery of his death and resurrection.

In a few moments we will receive this Eucharist by which we are saved from sin and death. Before doing so, however, I will wash the feet of twelve parishioners as a sign of the profound love that Christ has for each one of us. This sign reminds me and Deacon Art that the deepest meaning of ministry is service to others. This sign reminds all of us that Christ washed us by the blood of his saving death on the cross. This sign reminds us of the depth of his love.