

Celebrating Holy Thursday locked down at home

Discovering new aspects of our discipleship and recovering long-forgotten parts of our tradition

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April 8, 2020



One of the skills that is not well developed among ordinary Catholics is that of taking a lead in a liturgical act: that is an action of two or more people which praises God through Jesus.

This is not a widespread skill because usually there is a priest (or perhaps a deacon or a catechist) who does this – and we think of them as 'the experts' and tend to leave it to them. The expert acts, everyone else reacts.

But that won't work if you are in lockdown this Holy Thursday and Good Friday. So you or someone with you will have to act as a leader if you are to actually celebrate – which is more than tuning in to a celebration – these great days.

Let's not forget, everyone who is baptized is able to stand before God and lead some sort of worship – it is a matter of basic Christian dignity.

So what are we doing on Holy Thursday?

We are challenged to experience anew (that is what we mean when we use words like 'remember' or 'recall') being the friends of the Christ around a table (Jn 15, 15). So we pray at a meal.

We are also challenged to experience that we Christians have a different vision of human relationships, which is based on mutual service. So we read the story of Jesus' act of foot-washing and note that we are Christian sisters and brothers at the table.

And despite the virus, we are rejoicing in God's love, offering God praise, and blessing God through, with and in Jesus. So we will use table prayers from his very earliest followers.

These household liturgies seem strange, but recall that the Passover meal was eaten in ordinary households and that praying around a table is what we are always reading about in the gospels, not least in the story of the Last Supper, which we want to experience for ourselves this night.

Your evening meal

Have your main meal in the evening and realize that it is a feast – we are thanking the Father for delivering us from sin and death through his Son: this is our Passover.

What makes a feast? Simple answer: more than one course. So if it is only beans on toast, have a second course, which can even be a scoop of ice cream or coffee and a biscuit. But I hope you can manage a much better feast than beans on toast!

When everyone who is taking part has sat down, take a small loaf of bread (a bread roll is ideal), or just a couple of slices, on a plate and bless the Father using this first-century prayer for household gatherings of Christians:

We give thanks to you, our Father,

for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us.

Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.

For as this broken loaf was once scattered over the mountains and then was gathered in and became one, so may your church be gathered together into your kingdom from the very ends of the earth.

Yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.

Then break up the loaf (or slices) into as many pieces as there are people around the table, and then pass the dish around for each to take a piece to eat.

After that, take a glass of wine (or grape-juice or just lemonade) and bless the Father saying (or ask someone else to say this prayer):

We give thanks to you, our Father,

for the holy vine of David, your servant, which you have made known to us.

Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.

Pass the glass from one to another, each drinking from the one cup.

Then enjoy whatever you are going to eat, and between the courses get someone else to read this story (Jn 13, 1-15):

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."

For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Continue with your meal, and 'after you all have had enough to eat, give thanks in this way':

We give you thanks, holy Father, for your holy name which you have made to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have made known to us.

Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.

You are the mighty ruler of all who has created all for your name's sake, and you have given food and drink to human beings for their enjoyment so that they might give thanks to you. But to us, from your generosity, you have given spiritual food and drink, and life eternal, through your servant.

Above all things we give thanks to you because you are mighty: to you be glory forever.

Remember, Lord, your church, deliver her from evil, make her complete in your love, and gather her from the four winds into your kingdom you have prepared for her, for yours is the power and the glory forever.

When meal is over

Mark (14, 46) tells us that when the meal was finished 'they sang a hymn' and then departed. You cannot go anywhere, but it is important to end on note of joy. So, what is your favorite hymn? Do all know the words? Can all sing it?

If not, when the washing-up is done, recalling that the hymn mentioned by Mark was probably a psalm, why not use this one (Ps 117 – it's the shortest):

Praise the Lord, all you nations!

Extol him, all you peoples!

For great is his steadfast love toward us;

and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.

Praise the Lord!

This is not a 'normal' Holy Thursday, but we may have discovered new aspects of our discipleship – and recovered long-forgotten parts of our tradition – through celebrating in this very unusual way.

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Taken from La Croix International