



New Life: From the Altar to the Tomb and Beyond
Holy Thursday (Last Supper) and Easter Vigil
17 and 19/20 April
Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

For my Reflection in the Burning Bush vlog last week I linked Palm Sunday of the Passion and the Good Friday Commemoration of the Lord's death on the Cross. In my mind as I have been reflecting on this weekend's Burning Bush there has been a link between the Last Supper and the Easter Vigil/Sunday. While some people use the vlog for personal prayer or in a Prayer Group, others like the Ethnic Chaplaincy Priests prefer to look at the Reflection to source ideas for their Homily preparation. The Triduum: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil/Easter Sunday is a challenging time for priests with regard to Homily preparation: we like to have something fresh to say and at the same time we're conscious that the ceremonies are a bit longer and our Congregations would appreciate Homilies that are not too long! So, this week I have split my Reflection into 2 parts while retaining the link between: Holy Thursday Evening Mass and the Easter Vigil. I have given it the title "From the Altar to the Tomb and Beyond."

Part 1 The Last Supper Mass – the Bread that Bleeds

As I write this Reflection on Maundy Thursday morning I am aware that tonight we gather at the threshold of the great Triduum – a sacred doorway (like the Jubilee Year has a focus on the doorway in Jubilee Churches) between death and life; suspended between the darkness of Good Friday and the radiant light of Easter. And, we begin, as Jesus did, around a table. The Last Supper was more than a meal, it was an invitation to share in the deepest mystery of our Faith: the Eucharist. When Jesus said "*This is my body, given for you*" the disciples gathered round the table must have been scandalised, these words were impossible, they knew Jesus was a miracle worker, a teacher, a healer, but this? He wasn't just speaking figuratively. He wasn't even offering them a memory in the sense we're used to in everyday parlance. He was offering Himself, body, blood, soul and divinity – poured out, in that moment, for them, for us.

At the end of the Last Supper Mass tonight we take the Blessed Sacrament in Procession to the Altar of Repose and we spend a time in Adoration before the great silence of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. A Hymn that is sung in whole or in part is Pange Lingua composed by St Thomas Aquinas. We're most familiar with the last 2 verses – the Tantum Ergo, translated:

*"Therefore, so great a Sacrament
let us venerate with heads bowed"*

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



Thomas was living and teaching in Orvieto (about an hour by train from Rome) and the Pope asked him to compose a Mass to celebrate the real presence, Corpus Christi; we recall that in the 13th Century, in the town of Bolsena, a priest doubted. He questioned whether Christ's presence in the Eucharist was real. *"Is this really the Body of Christ?"* he wondered *"Or is it just a symbol?"* As he consecrated the host, it bled. Blood seeped onto the corporal, staining it with the undeniable truth.

The magnificent Cathedral at Orvieto houses the cloth; it is not just a relic; it's a reminder that the Eucharist is Christ alive and with us now and always. Tonight as we spend a time in Adoration at the Altar of Repose we recall that Jesus gives His body for our transformation: its about communing with the living God.

In the Prayer after Communion tonight the Priest says:

"Grant, almighty God, that just as we are renewed by the Supper of Your Son in the present age, so we may enjoy his banquet for all eternity."

As we pray quietly at the Altar of Repose: think of the hunger in our world – so many seek meaning, healing and fulfillment. People are starving for something real; something that anchors them, heals them, saves them. Here it is. On the Altar: the God who bleeds, that we might live.

Part 2 Easter Sunday: The Vigil – the Empty Tomb

The Stone and the Light

On this Holy Night we shift from the Altar to the tomb. The Eucharist gave us Christ's body – broken and shared. Now the Cross has taken it. And for a moment, it seems death has won. We look to the stone slab in the empty tomb so venerated in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem today. This is where Jesus' lifeless body was laid. I've seen it, and prayed there – perhaps you have too. Pilgrims from around the world, in normal times, gather there to weep, to kneel, to lay their hands on that cold stone. It is as if that stone holds his warmth, the imprint of his love.

But, that's the key: the stone, through it bears the weight of death, does not have the final word. In the Gospel of St Luke, at the Easter Vigil we hear these words said to the women: *"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."* Death has been defeated. And in this very place the darkness is shattered. The tomb opens. The light enters.

Tonight the fire is kindled at the Easter Vigil, the Paschal Candle is lit and the famous Exsultet is sung; it contains these words: *"This is the night, when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld."* In celebration of our joy and hope we each hold a lighted candle too as we proclaim our Faith in the Risen Lord.

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



What does this tell us? It tells us that the same Jesus who laid down his life on that cold stone is the one who offers us new life in ours. The stone we thought marked the end – is just the beginning.

In Jerusalem, there is another detail: inside the Holy Sepulchre, near the tomb, a candle burns – always. In the midst of death's shadow, a light continues to burn. The candle symbolises something eternal: Life has triumphed. Death has been conquered. And now, life – true, radiant, everlasting life – burns with an unquenchable flame.

Conclusion: One Life, Two Altars

So here is the mystery of our faith: on Maundy Thursday, Jesus lays down his body on the altar to be broken and shared, that we might be nourished and healed.

On Good Friday, He lays down on the stone slab, to die and rise – offering us the gift of Resurrection, the hope of everlasting life. The Paschal Candle alight in our Sanctuaries in Eastertide will remind us of this great gift – we rejoice and are glad. Alleluia, Alleluia.

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