

Washed by the Lent of Life

Mass of the Lord's Supper
April 9, 2009
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As we come to this Mass of the Lord's Supper, on the day we call "Holy Thursday", at the start of our sacred three days of celebrating the Paschal Mystery, I wonder how many of us ask, "Where has Lent gone?" It seems to have vanished, to have slipped by, been other than what we intended it to be back on Ash Wednesday.

But then there is what you might call "The Lent of Intention" and there is "The Lent of Life". The one what we wanted it to be but it wasn't, and the other that we didn't intend it to be but it was. What has our life been like the last six weeks? What has the Lent of Life been for us?

My question to us this evening is, "How have we been washed by Lent?" How have we been washed not by what we wanted but by life itself? Let's ask that question and bring ourselves through it to the washing of the feet and the table around which we will gather for the Lord's Supper.

How have I been washed by life this Lent? I buried my 95-year-old Dad just ten days before Lent began. So I have been washed not so much by sorrow as by the extraordinary compassion and sympathy and support of so many people, with their comments, their cards, their prayers and Masses. I read these cards daily by the light of a candle before the photo of Dad's funeral card. That's how I have been washed by life this Lent. How about you?

A close friend was washed by Lent in a humiliating way. She shared a catty comment in an e-mail to her sisters and sister-in-law—the kind of comment that too easily slips into email communications—an unkind word about her oldest brother, and then wouldn't you know it, the devil made her do it, she sent it by mistake, irretrievably, to the brother about whom she wrote the cutting, hurtful thing. You don't need to know the rest of the story. She has been washed by life this Lent by shame, humiliation, and pondering why she can be so unkind to a family member. How about you, how have you been washed this Lent?

The Jesuits have been washed this Lent by the bankruptcy that our province was forced to declare because of the sexual abuse of minors by our Jesuit brothers several decades ago. We've tried to lather this washing with the soap of communal prayer and faith sharing. Since the start of Lent one million Americans have lost their jobs. They join the 13 million unemployed in our country. They—with their families and loved ones—have been washed with anxiety, inability to provide, humiliation, loss of dignity and self-worth. That is some washing of Lent. How about us?

A friend is being washed by the cruel, slow dying of her husband from a most rare disease in the first year of their longed-for retirement. Another is washed with the birth of her first child. Someone else by seemingly not being able to get over a break-up with a loved partner. Many are

washed by wear and tear and work and worry. Or maybe just by a long winter. Our nation's president has to be washed this Lent by daily demands that are unsupportable by any human being, no matter how smart or how charming he is, or how gorgeous and fashionable his wife. Many are washed by small, self-reducing failures or behaviors which betray narrow and selfish hearts. So again—in any of these ways or any of the uncanny ways of your life—how have you been washed this Lent? I'm sure the Lent of Life has not slipped you by quickly or easily even if your Lent of Intention may have.

The invitation tonight in preparation for the Lord's Supper comes not from me but from the Lord himself. Come, he says, by however you have been washed by life this Lent, bring yourself fully to your Lord who with garments put aside awaits you with basin, water, and towel to wash your life with his life, your Lent with his love. It's one thing to be washed by life, it's another to place, to entrust, this life in his hands and to let him love you in the washing, to transform with the cooperation of your faith the stuff of your life into the stuff of his life for you.

Jesus did not promise to remove our human suffering. Suffering remains suffering. He promised not to remove it, but to transform its meaning, such that by accepting with faith the cup of our suffering, which will feel just like suffering, our lips meet his over the brim. That's how he also can transform what each of us has experienced at the washing by life of this Lent if in faith—and with the opportunity this evening to express it in ritual—we bring ourselves to him and let him wash us.

This coming to Jesus to be washed is his invitation to us to join with one another as one faith community, one washed community, in his supper. It's really not the "Last" Supper; it's more the "First Supper". Perhaps this evening our eyes will be opened in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine to the presence in us and among us and everywhere in our world of Jesus of Nazareth as our lord and the world's Lord. Maybe our eyes will be open to him alive and with us tonight or perhaps on the Easter night which will bring to fullness the days upon which we now enter. Let us bring ourselves as fully as we can, as firmly in faith as we are able, as acceptingly washed by life this Lent, and as willing as he asks to be in placing ourselves trustingly in his hands on this night of his supper which begins our holy days together as a Christian community.