

Brothers and Sisters,

This Mass that we celebrate today, the Mass of the Lord's Supper, beckons us to focus on three essential aspects of our faith. First and foremost is the Eucharist. While every Mass is an anamnesis, a reliving of the last supper, today we focus on the institution of the Eucharist in a special way. Our reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians is the oldest of the 4 biblical accounts of Jesus taking the bread and wine, giving it to his disciples, telling them, "This is my body that is for you," and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

For two thousand years the Church has continually taught us that what Jesus did at the Last Supper was to give us a true sacrifice and a permanent sacrament of His real presence. Jesus is truly present with us in the Eucharist. This is why the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have declared that the Eucharist is the font from which our entire faith flows, and the apex, the point to which it returns. We are a Eucharistic people. This means that everything we do as Catholics must be rooted in the Eucharist, in the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is what keeps the Church, the people of God, united to God. When we receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, we are receiving God into our very bodies. Our bodies are being united with God. That is what makes the Eucharist so important. It is not merely a spiritual union with God, but one that is physical as well. When we receive communion, Jesus is as close to us as he was to Mary when in her womb. This is why we can't be nonchalant when we receive the Eucharist. It isn't bread and wine we receive. It isn't even blessed bread and wine. No, it is not bread a wine at all. It ceases to be bread and wine all together, and becomes Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. So it is Jesus himself, fully present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, that we take into our own bodies. And in doing so, we unite our entire being to God.

Of course this is only possible because, on this same night, Jesus instituted the priesthood. He called certain men to enter into a special ministry of service, the ordained priesthood. And Jesus still calls men to His priesthood today. He does this, because without men to serve as priests, there would be no Eucharist to unite us to God. Without priesthood, the faith as we know it would come to a startling halt. This is why it's so important for us to celebrate the ordained priesthood and encourage men to enter into this ministry. In fact, this is the reason Pope Benedict has declared a yearlong celebration of priesthood. Priesthood is an essential part of our faith. We need men to answer the call to serve at the altar. We need to create a culture where we encourage men to respond to God's call to the ordained priesthood. We need to let children know how important it is for us to have priests, and how fulfilling life as a priest can be.

I have been a priest for a little over 9 months, and I can say it is a wonderful life. I say this, not only based on my short experience as a priest, but based on the lives of other priests as well. Yesterday, several priests from our diocese gathered for a day of reflection with Msgr. Stephen Rossetti. Msgr. Rossetti is a psychologist, and has conducted one of the largest studies on the quality of life of a priest. His findings, which have also been corroborated by other studies, show that as a whole, priests are about 10% more likely than the average person to say that they are happy. In our own diocese, that number is even higher. You would never know this

from the popular media, would you? So often they make it seem like all priests must be miserable because of celibacy, or any other number of things in our lives. But study after study shows that in fact, priests are very happy with their lives. They are happier than the average American. And behind me today is the proof. Can anyone imagine a person who is happier with his life than Fr. Werth? In the 9 months I have lived with him, I have seen a total of two moods for him: phenomenal and spectacular. How awesome is that?

As a Church, I think we need to let men know that this life is not the burden that the media makes it out to be. It is fulfilling. And how could it not be? Jesus himself is the author of this way of life. Does it have its struggles, yes. Does it have its burdens, yes. But it also has its graces. Priests by enlarge say that they are happy. So there is no reason that we should not be encouraging young boys to consider priesthood when they get older. There is no reason we should discourage young men from becoming priest – after all, being a Eucharistic people means that we need men to serve us as priests.

Finally, this Mass today reminds all of us that it is not just the priest who is called to service, but each member of the Church. We are all called to service. Jesus took off His cloak, knelt down, and washed the feet of His disciples. This gesture of loving service to His disciples was an expression of His love for them. This gesture demonstrates that love is an act of service. It challenges every generation of Christians to express their love through acts of service. What Jesus showed in this gesture is that love and service are intimately connected. Love is not about me, and how I can benefit, but about the other, and how I can serve them.

At the core of our celebration tonight is the love of Jesus: the love that inspired Him to give us the Eucharist, the love that gives us the gift of the priesthood, and the love that expresses itself in humble service.

Tonight the entirety of our faith comes together in the love of Christ. When we recognize this love, we are moved to proclaim His gift of the Eucharist and of the priesthood. These gifts stir us to action by serving one another. This is the deepest meaning of our Holy Thursday celebration: to imitate Jesus, who said in the Gospel we just read: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Brothers and sisters, peace to you.