HOLY THURSDAY
JESUS: BROKEN BREAD, OFFERED AS NOURISHMENT

Click the picture to go to the video

COMMENTARY BY FR. FERNANDO ARMELLINI

Introduction

Among the many names by which the Eucharist was called, the one that best expresses the meaning and richness of the sacrament is the breaking of the bread. The disciples of Emmaus recognized the Lord *"in the breaking of the bread"* (Lk 24:35); the community of Jerusalem diligently participates in the catechesis of the apostles and to "the breaking of bread;" at Troas they met *"on the first day of the week to break bread"* (Acts 20:7).

Why were the early Christians so fond of this expression? What memories, what emotions did it arouse in them? The meal of the pious Israelites always started with a blessing on the bread. The head of the family took it in his hands, broke it and offered it to the diners. It could not be eaten before it is being broken and shared with everyone present. Since childhood, Jesus noted Joseph devoutly fulfill this sacred rite every day, and he himself, as an adult, repeated it several times: in Nazareth, when his father passed away and during his public life wherever he was invited at table.

One evening, in Jerusalem, he gave it a new meaning. At the Last Supper, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying: "This is me. Take, eat!", arcane, enigmatic words that the disciples understood only after Easter. At the end of his "day," the Master had summed up in that gesture his entire history, his whole life given. He had not offered anything but himself. He had given his person as food. Every bit of his existence had been given to satisfy people's hunger: hunger for God and his word, hunger for the meaning of life, happiness, and love.

Moving in front of the *"sheep without a shepherd"* he sat down to teach many things: he had broken the bread of the Word (Mk 6:33-34). To those who were hungry for forgiveness he had offered the signs of God's tenderness.

In Jericho, no one imagined that Zacchaeus was hungry. No one showed himself sensitive to his pleading for understanding and hospitality. No one saw the one who was ashamed to be seen, hidden among the leaves of a sycamore tree, but Jesus. He entered his house and satiated him with love and joy.

At the Eucharistic table, during any celebration, Jesus presents—in the signs of bread—all his life and asks to be eaten.

In the world people "eat." They struggle to overpower and enslave; they "devour" themselves to hoard the goods and to dominate. One who proves himself the strongest, in this competition for food, is successful. Jesus revolutionized this pre-human way of relating. Instead of "eating" the others, of fighting for the conquest of the kingdoms of this world—as the evil one had suggested to him—he had himself eaten.

It is from this gift of himself as food that the new humanity began. The gesture of putting on a table, in front of a hungry person, a loaf of bread and a cup of wine is a clear invitation not to look at or to contemplate, but to sit down, to take, to eat and to drink.

On the altar, the Eucharistic bread is a proposal of life: eating it means to adhere to Jesus, to accept to become with him bread and to offer oneself as food to anyone who is hungry.

"We cannot live without the Lord's supper." "Yes, I went to the assembly and celebrated the Lord's Supper with my brothers and sisters, because I am a Christian."

Uttered by the martyrs of Abitinae, in proconsular Africa, these words reveal the passion with which, from the earliest centuries, Christians have participated in the breaking of bread every Sunday. It was for them an indispensable requirement. They understood that that was the hallmark of the disciples of the Lord Jesus.

To internalize the message, we repeat:
We cannot live without the Lord's Supper.

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-8,11-14

Every people remember the glorious moments of its history and tend to fix them in rituals that are meant to evoke and, in a way, to relive the events of the past. Examples of these rites are the military parade, the gun salute, memorial speeches, the unveiling of monuments.

The Lord has recommended to Israel not to forget the miracles with which she was freed from Egypt: *"But be careful and be on your guard. Do not forget these things which your own eyes have seen nor let them depart from your heart as long as you live. But on the contrary, teach them to your children and to your children's children"* (Dt 4:9).

Israel is a nation that remembers and when she proclaims her own faith she does not delve into arguments but says: *"My father was a wandering Aramean; he went down to Egypt to find refuge there ... The Egyptians maltreated us, oppressed us and subjected us to harsh slavery. So we called to Yahweh … He brought us out of Egypt with a firm hand and outstretched arm"* (Dt 26:5-8).

"So as not to forget," every year, on the fourteenth day of the first month, they celebrate with a dinner—the liberation from Egypt, her birth as a people.

In our passage, the moments of this meal are pointed out: the choice of the lamb, its sacrifice, the sprinkling of blood on the doorposts and lintel of the houses and the way it should be cooked and eaten (vv. 1-8). The function of the blood of the lamb is explained—a sign that rescued the Israelites from death (vv. 11-13)—and then the instruction is given: *"This is the day you are to remember and celebrate in honor of Yahweh. It is to be kept as a festival day for all generations forever"* (v. 14).

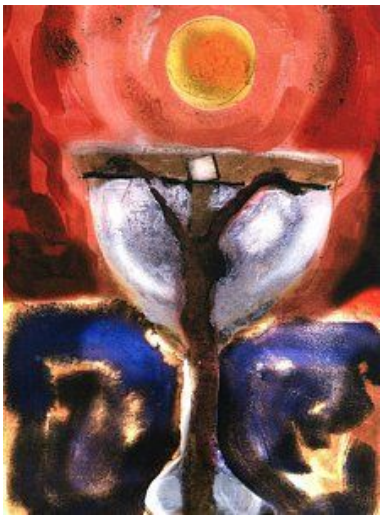
During the Passover meal, to the diners reclining at table, the breadwinner clarifies the meaning of what they are doing. As it is recorded in Haggadah—"in every generation everyone must consider himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt, because the Lord has not freed only our fathers, but with them, also us."

The Israelites do not celebrate an event of the past but celebrate their personal liberation. At Easter they are aware of their vocation as a people. They have had the experience of slavery; they have lived in a foreign land, and God has chosen them to announce to the world that he is the liberator. They are chosen to announce a God who does not tolerate any form of slavery, and a God who loves and protects stranger and anyone subjected to harassment (Ex 22:20).

However, Israel has not drawn all the consequences from her experience. She has not reached the point of *"releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed"*—as the prophet recommended (Is 58:6). She has not rejected every form of enslavement; she has only mitigated slavery practiced by other peoples (Dt 15:12-18). She continued to believe that the land promised to her by God was the one she had managed to take from the Canaanites who lived there. She did not understand that the real land of freedom is different: it is one in which Christ brings to all who believe in him and trust in his word.

From this liberation and the Eucharistic banquet with which Christians continue to celebrate, the Passover of Israel was but a faint image (1 Cor 10:6,11).

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26



A certain devotional and intimate language, developed over the centuries, contributed to blur and, sometimes, even to compromise the authentic sense of the Eucharist. The breaking of the bread does not aim to capture Jesus in order to keep him closer and to worship him, but to be both food and drink.

The Christian who eats the Eucharistic bread assumes, before God and the community, a solemn commitment. They unite themselves to Christ to form one body with him, as the bride and groom *"become one flesh; so that they are no longer two, but one flesh"* (Mk 10:7-8).

There lies a grave danger in the celebration of the Eucharist: that it be detached from life and reduced to a ritual, a pious practice in which one participates as a duty, but for which one can also do without.

It happens, unfortunately, that life is a denial of the gesture made with the breaking of the bread. This is why every Christian is challenged by the stern warning which Paul addresses to the community of Corinth and precede the passage that is now being proposed to us in the reading: *"I cannot praise you for your gatherings are not for the better but for the worse. Your gatherings are no longer the Supper of the Lord"* (1 Cor 11:17,20). What was happening in Corinth? There were sexual licentiousness, strife, and factions; but what most worried Paul was a particularly outrageous behavior of the Corinthians when they met for the Holy Eucharist. Some were eating and drinking beyond measure while others remained without food.

In Corinth—as in all primitive communities—the Eucharist was not celebrated in churches, but in private homes that rich Christians put at the disposal of their brothers and sisters in faith. The Corinthian community was composed almost entirely of poor people, laborers, longshoremen, and slaves. The wealthy, the influential people, the nobles were few (1 Cor 1:26), but they were noted for their arrogance and haughtiness. They had not yet realized that arrogance and ambition are incompatible with the Eucharist.

On the day appointed for the breaking of the bread, they loved to meet each other from the early hours of the afternoon in one of the couches of their villas. Then, lying on comfortable sofas, they indulged in revelry while their brothers and sisters were at work. Exhausted by fatigue, when they presented themselves for the celebration, they were greeted with detachment and, sometimes, even ridiculed.

To show how absurd and incompatible such a conduct is with faith in Christ, Paul reminds the Corinthians the meaning of the breaking of the bread. The Eucharist is not food to be consumed in solitude. It is bread broken and shared with the brothers and sisters. Those who eat it identify themselves with Christ. They declare that they are determined to make his own gesture of love and are committed to giving life to the brothers and sisters, as he did. They do not individually make this choice but united in one body with the community. It is, therefore, unacceptable that, while making the gesture indicating communion and total availability to give themselves, they behave in so haughty and insolent way that cause division.

A community that comes together for the breaking of the bread with these unworthy interior dispositions *"eats and drinks judgment upon itself"* (1 Cor 11:28-29); its celebration is a lie, a monument to hypocrisy.

After the gesture over the bread, Paul explains to the Corinthians: Jesus took the cup, saying, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me"* (v. 25).

In the Semitic culture, drinking of the same cup meant to declare willingness to share the same fate, even unto death. The invitation of Jesus to drink his cup is the most challenging request that he makes to the disciple. He asks him to do, along with him, the resolute choice of the total gift of self. The risk of losing their lives scares, but Jesus assures: *"Whoever would save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"* (Mt 16:25).

Gospel: John 13:1-15

Reading the Gospel according to John, one is surprised by the fact that the institution of the Eucharist referred to by the other

evangelists is not narrated. This gap becomes even more remarkable when one considers that John devoted an entire chapter (Jn 6) and the story of the Last Supper, which occupies a quarter of his Gospel (Jn 13–17) to the theme of "Bread of Life." How come he has not hinted the most important fact in these five chapters? It was not an oversight. The omission is deliberate and, if one considers the episode, which has been replaced, one understands also the goal John wants to achieve.

In lieu of the institution of the Eucharist, he inserted the washing of feet, a fact which the other evangelists ignore, but which for him has paramount importance. With this substitution, he wanted to make it clear to the Christians of his community that the Eucharist and the washing of the feet to some extent, are interchangeable. They are intertwined, linked; they can be understood only if one is related to the other.

The washing of the feet clarifies the meaning of the breaking of the bread. It highlights what it entails for the disciple to enter into communion with the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

The introduction of the story is solemn. It starts with the indication of time: Easter was fast approaching. It is the feast that celebrates the passage from slavery to freedom. Jesus is about to realize his Easter. Now is the time of his departure, the transition from this world to the Father. He must plunge into the deep and dark waters of the passion and death to trace the path that will introduce all people to the land of freedom.

After recalling Easter, the hour is mentioned, that mysterious hour which John has already referred to several times in his Gospel.

The first stroke rang out at Cana when Jesus said to her mother: *"My hour"* (Jn 2:4) has not yet come. Later, in Jerusalem, other chimes were heard: no one has managed to get their hands on Jesus *"because his hour had not yet come"* (Jn 7:30; Jn 8:20). A few days before his Passion, Jesus announces that the hour is approaching: *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... Now my soul is in distress. Shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour? But I have come to this hour'"* (Jn 12:23,27).

It's the time he awaited most, the one in which, having immensely loved his own, the opportunity is offered to him to give the highest proof of his love with the gift of life.

After alluding to the dinner and to Judas—the disciple who, moved by the evil one, was about to deliver the Master to the chief priests—the story resumes with a very solemn voice: *"Jesus knew that the Father had entrusted all things to him, and as he had come from God, he was going to God"* (v.3).

Why this long turning of words? The reference to Jesus' authority, his divine origin, his final destiny seems excessive to introduce an apparently trivial washing of the feet. The text would be redundant if no one realizes the revolutionary significance of the gesture made by Jesus. For John, the fact is of exceptional importance: the one who is going to stoop to the level of the slave is none other than the Lord, the Only-Begotten; seeing him, one sees the Father (Jn 14:9).

Before and during the ritual meals, the pious Israelites used to make ablution with water. At the head of the table, hands were washed by a servant or by the youngest of the guests. At the Last Supper, something unheard happens. In the mind of the evangelist, the

fact remained so clearly and indelibly engrained to be minutely remembered. Under the astonished gaze of the disciples, Jesus rises from the table, lays aside his garments, takes a towel, girds it around his waist; then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.

Everything takes place in silence. The disciples are silent: the scene they are witnessing is so amazing, thus leaving them stunned. They do not believe their eyes: Jesus takes off his clothes—as do the slaves—and does not wash the hands, but the feet. He subjects himself to such humiliating gesture that a Jew, even enslaved, had to refuse to perform it in order not to dishonor his people.

Jesus does it: he, God.

The astonishment of the disciples is understandable: they lived for three years with Jesus, recognized him as the Christ and are impatiently waiting for him to bring the Scriptures to completion. They learned that the Messiah *"reigns from sea to sea … his foes are crushed before him … all kings bow down to him, and all nations serve him"* (Ps 72:8-11).

Now, in the upper room, their hopes of glory fade, mercilessly demolished by the scene that is slowly taking place under their eyes. At the Last Supper, the God *"who dwelt among us"* (Jn 1:14) has shown his cards and his true identity. In the washing of the feet of the disciples, they have been able to read, loud and clear, his profession: not master, but "slave."

It's impossible to imagine a more surprising revelation of God. Yet this God-servant is the only true One; all others are idols created by human mind. Now, we begin to see the reason for the importance that John has given to this episode.

Washing the disciples' feet, Jesus has forever destroyed the image that people had made of God: the great sovereign God sitting on a throne; the God who claims worship, respect, acts on submission by the subjects; the God who demands obedience and respect otherwise is indignant and reacts with reprisals and punishments; the dominating God who destroys those who dare to stand against him.

Jesus makes present a God with a completely different face. It is the God who kneels before man, his creature. He places man on a pedestal while He—the Almighty— bows down to serve. This is the only God in which we are invited to believe. Take it or leave it!

Faced with this scene—which causes dizziness—our grotesque and pathetic competitions to get hand-kisses, bows, honorary titles, awards are revealed. Our conflicts to always reach higher positions are petty.

Peter understands that the Master is introducing into the world a principle that messes up all the patterns dictated by common sense, distorts all criteria of judgment welcomed as logical by people. He cannot admit that the superiors, the most gifted, one who, with full merit, can succeed and assume a prestigious position, must be regarded as servants of the least. He reacts and, on behalf of all, amazingly asks: "Why Lord, do you want to wash my feet?" then he poses a categorical denial: "You shall never wash my feet!"

He cannot accept that the Master performs this gesture. Jesus is not surprised by his inability to understand: the logic of the free and unconditional service is far from the thoughts of people,

as heaven from earth. Not surprisingly, it is unacceptable to Peter who—as Jesus has already noted—does not think as God, but as people do (Mk 8:33). "If I do not wash you, you can have no part with me"—he says. The gesture made by the Master is not a rebuke, nor an invitation to accept as a norm of one's life. It would be asking too much from a baffled and hesitant disciple.

Jesus does not say: "If you do not agree to wash the feet of the brothers, you have nothing to do with me," but, "If I do not wash your feet."

It is Jesus—not Peter—who has to wash the feet. Peter is only asked not to prevent God from revealing his own identity as man's slave. If he forbids Him, he would not obtain salvation. To be saved, in fact, means letting oneself be freed from the belief that humanizes one who is going up, who is dominating, and who is making one serve.

Those who reject the proposal suggested by the evil one and chooses—as God does—to be the servant of all is saved. Salvation has come to humanity when Jesus fulfilled the descent sung in the famous hymn of the Letter to the Philippians: *"Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God, as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness, and in his appearance found as a man. He humbled himself by being obedient to death, death on the cross"* (Phil 2:5-8).

Having concluded the dialogue with Peter, the story continues with a detailed description of the gestures made by Jesus: *"he puts off his garment, went back to the table*…" (Jn 13:14). Each movement is accurately detected by the evangelist and is charged with symbolism. Jesus had laid down the garments, a gesture indicating his identity as a slave. The slaves, in fact, were the ones who wore skimpy clothes to be freer in their movements.

Now Jesus takes up his clothes and sits down.

Both of these gestures recall the condition of the free person (the slaves do not put bulky coats and remained standing, ready to take the master's orders).

After having given his own service to people, Jesus entered the glorious condition of heaven and the Father has him seated to his right.

A detail that is likely to go unnoticed is pointed out: John does not say that Jesus took off his apron before getting back his clothes. He kept this garment on; he brings it also to heaven. He did not come to earth to play the part of the servant and return to heaven to be the master. He always remains a servant because that is the identity of God. The apron is the symbol of service. It is the uniform that the Christian can never put off. He must wear it around the clock. At any time, a brother or sister may need him, and he must be available to run to their aid. It is from this apron and not from other garments that authentic disciples are recognized.

A few verses later Jesus represents, in the form of a will, the central point of his proposal of life: *"Now I give you a new commandment: Love one another! Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another! By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another"* (Jn 13:34-35).

A disciple is one who follows in the footsteps of the Master. *"Your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ had"*—Paul recommends to the Philippians (Phil 2:5).

I have just given you an example—Jesus says—that as I have done you also may do. He *"has not come to be served but to serve"* (Mk 10:45). Even his disciples, following his example, are called to be servants. Now we can resume the topic of the Eucharist.

The washing of feet makes us learn what the gesture of approaching the altar to "receive the Eucharistic bread" means. It means to consciously accept to identify oneself with the one who, throughout his life, has worn the "apron." To eat his body and to drink his blood means becoming one body with him.

In the Second Reading, Paul recommended that, before the breaking of the bread, everyone should do a thorough examination of conscience. The only question that must be asked, and that sums up all the commitments of the Christian life is: Have I always worn the "apron" or am I naked and, like Peter on the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21:7), do I need to get dressed before going out to meet Christ?

"A servant is not greater than his master, nor is the messenger greater than he who sent him. Understand this and blessed are you if you put them into practice" (vv. 16-17). The passage proposed by today's reading does not include these two verses. We mention them all the same because they form the conclusion of the whole story.

To undress oneself, to make oneself a slave, to put on the apron, is a journey that seems to have as its ultimate goal the pain, humiliation, and death.

A certain spirituality of the past has indeed presented adherence to Christ as a search of suffering and pain as a means of pleasing God. From here the conviction that the Christian life is not a source of joy, but of anguish and fear is derived. Man seeks happiness. It is God who has placed this irrepressible desire in his heart. It is difficult to identify the path to get there and it is easy to focus on the wrong targets and find oneself disappointed and dejected. One sins when one bets on an illusory happiness. The Gospel is good news; it offers bliss. Against all human logic, Jesus guarantees to those who trust his proposal: "You will be blessed."

Here's the surprise: the gift of self is the only path that leads to joy. It is the first of the two beatitudes found in the Gospel of John. Jesus will address the second to Thomas: *"Happy are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"* (Jn 20:29). Two beatitudes: one for those who practice charity and the other for those who have faith.

READ: Jesus loves his own to the end of his life and to the end of the possibility to love. He washes the apostles' feet and tells them to do likewise. Otherwise, they will not share in his heritage.

REFLECT: For centuries, washing of the feet was practiced as one of the sacraments, a visible sign of invisible reality. Performed by Jesus, this sign of hospitality reveals the little-known dimension of God who performs and does the service. If we reject this dimension, we cannot have part in Him. If we accept it, we are challenged to imitate Him. Blessed are we if we grasp the meaning of love as service till the end.

PRAY: Pray for perseverance. Pray for all those who once believed and have abandoned belief.

ACT: Perform some humble service for another, especially someone who is dear to you.