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CATHOLIC SOCIAL SERVICES
PALM SUNDAY BRUNCH ADDRESS

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“No Greater Love”

Good afternoon! And Happy Palm Sunday! And Holy Week! What a blessing to be here with all of you. I don't know how I was chosen to speak to such an illustrious group of people, but I am very grateful to be here. It is great to see so many of you here to support the work and ministry of Catholic Social Services. We are very grateful for your presence and support.

It is hard to believe that it has now been eight months since I was consecrated and installed as your bishop. How the time flies! How the blessings flow! How the graces have come alive!

These eight months have been filled with many graces and blessings. The Lord's generosity to me has abounded! The magnificence and fidelity of God is beyond our imagining, lest we never forget. And perhaps this Holy Week is the most appropriate time to come to a deeper understanding of the immensity of Christ's love for each of us – this we should never forget. In His humility, Jesus counted everyone as better than Himself in the sense that they were worth dying for. It is to this reality that we live this week, not in sorrow, but in gratitude, joy, and hope.....that you and I are worth dying for. There is “No Greater Love.”

As I said in my homily this morning to begin this Holy Week, what we celebrate this week is not something that just happened 2000+ years ago. It is not just something that is symbolic of what happened long ago. It really is about the here and now. “Jesus refused to save the world by what we recognize as power. He still does not use divine force to wipe out disease, poverty, crime, oppression, injustice or error. Jesus still tries to convert it rather than control it. He still tries to convert us rather than control us. He still chooses to love us rather than punish. He still chooses meekness over might, poverty over plenty, service over supremacy and suffering over strong-armed tactics.”

These saving actions of Jesus are part of the here and now. They are all part of this Holy Week. There is “No Greater Love.”

As you all know, “No Greater Love” is my Episcopal motto. This mystery of the Lord's sacred humanity and of His infinite love, “even unto death” (Phil 2.8), is central not only to my coat of arms, but to my identity and ministry as a priest and bishop. The responsibility to love and to sacrifice in

imitation of Jesus Christ really is the call of every disciple. The phrase “No Greater Love” is taken from the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel at the Last Supper:

Jesus said to his apostles, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I loved you. There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” [John 15:5-14]

This week, from my perspective, is really a contemplation of “No Greater Love.” The events of Holy Week bear witness to this reality in Jesus. The Passion Narratives in each of the Gospels express this truth. And for us who take the time to pray and reflect upon the readings of this Holy Week will come to a deeper awareness of the depth of this love in Jesus.

One of events of Holy Week which has had a profound influence in my life as a priest is the “Washing of the Feet of the Apostles.” This was the reason why it was on the holy card for my Episcopal ordination. In John’s Gospel, we find the story. It comes to us this week on Holy Thursday night.

We all know the story. We know what happens when Jesus comes to Peter and wants to wash his feet. Peter refuses. Perhaps it is hard for him to see Jesus taking the role of a slave, which is exactly what He did.

Slaves were looked down upon in the ancient world and Peter could not stand the thought of his teacher, his master, his Lord, doing the work of a slave. It would have been appropriate for one of the disciples to have washed Jesus’ feet, but the reverse is intolerable.

Peter is so human! Peter’s response expresses his love, but is a defective love. It lacks humility, one of the essential attributes of discipleship. Indeed, humility is what is demonstrated in Jesus’ action. Peter’s response shows us the pride and self-will that is at the heart of all sin, the very thing for which the cross will atone and bring healing. Peter is operating out of a worldly viewpoint, and not for the first time. But the apostles will only come to fully understand this event after the cross and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

After Jesus finishes washing their feet, He puts his outer garment back on and returns to His place, asking, “Do you understand what I have done for you?” (v. 12). Again, they will not completely understand this until they have seen the cross, but they can at least grasp His act as an example of humility. Then Jesus spells out the implications for their own lives of what He has done: “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” (vv. 14-15).

The disciples are to pass on the same teaching that He, their teacher and Lord, has done by conveying as He has, both in word and deed, the selfless love of God. The community Jesus has brought together is to manifest the love of God that He has revealed through serving one another with no vestige of pride or position. There will be recognized positions of leadership within the new community, but the exercise of leadership is to follow this model of servant.

The diocese had two wonderful days early this week in Pastoral Ministry Days. We heard of many ways in which people exercise leadership following this model of servant; many remarkable personal stories of people giving their lives in service of the Church here in western South Dakota, all across the diocese.

I was very inspired by what I heard these two days as well what I have witnessed in my short time here as your bishop. When I hear of the number of volunteers – servants, if you will – who have given so much time out at *Terra Sancta*, cleaning and helping wherever needed to get it opened and keep it going week after week, it is inspiring. If you haven't seen *Terra Sancta* yet, I encourage you to go out there and see what has taken place. It is most impressive!

We need not look far to see this very same model lived out through the work and ministry of Catholic Social Services (CSS) in providing services to people of all socio-economic, ethnic, and religious affiliations across western South Dakota, especially in reaching out to the economically disadvantaged populations in our region. It is such an impressive organization, isn't it?

And in a real way, all of you gathered here today are “washing the feet of others” as you support the mission of CSS as they reach out to so many across our diocese, “*working together to change lives.*” You help keep their dream alive through your support and generosity. Thank you.

Each of us in our own way are called to “wash the feet” of others following in the footsteps of our Master, manifesting the love of God that Jesus has revealed through serving others without pride or position, but with humility. There is “no greater love.”

A wonderful woman, Catherine Doherty, born at the turn of the century into the wealth and luxury of Russian nobility, died in 1985 at the age of 89 and whose cause for canonization as a saint has been officially opened in the Catholic Church, “was a woman in love with God. The implications of that love story, as it unfolded throughout her life, brought her enough adventure, heartbreak and joy to fill several lifetimes. She survived — and her love of God was tested and grew — through two World Wars, the Russian Revolution, and the Great Depression. She knew the privileged life of aristocratic wealth, as well as the grinding poverty and uncertainty of a refugee. She knew the pain of a broken marriage and the struggles of single parenthood. Through it all, her faith in God and love for Him remained intact and led her to work with the poor in small, humble ways, forsaking material comforts in order to do so.

Her work in social justice in both Canada and the United States led to the establishment of Friendship House, and later the community called Madonna House.” [taken from the Madonna House website]

You can go on the Internet and look under Madonna House to find out about this remarkable woman.

Through the years, Catherine became well-known for her social justice work with the poor and minorities. She was a forerunner in the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and was a friend of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. She kept good company, didn't she? Her words, like her actions, were always strong, clear, and uncompromising, solidly based on the Gospel of Christ. She said: [and I quote]

"Do little things well for the love of God. Every task, routine or not, is of redeeming, supernatural value because we are united to Christ. We must be recollected and stay aware of this truth. It was through such seemingly mundane tasks, performed with the motivation of love for God, that the world could be restored to Christ."

In speaking about this Gospel passage, she wrote, [and I quote]

"It isn't too hard to love a distant God and even pray to him in cool ancient cathedrals, modern lovely chapels, and even in poustinias, but at all times we must not forget that the Lord spoke constantly of prayer and service."

"I have come to serve," he said. He might as well have said, "I have come to love," which is what he really meant. Do we?

It is, of course, good to work to alleviate human misery and need by banding together in committees, forums and what-have-you. But love is essentially something that goes from person to person. It is personalized, one to one, for then comes the true involvement in the other.

Then comes the understanding, the discernment that belongs to prayer, and the incarnation of that discernment that belongs to service.

Together they form the love that Christ talked so constantly about in his Gospel, this Gospel that should be lived without compromise." [end of quote]

As I said earlier, Jesus' washing of the feet of the Apostles has had a profound influence in my life. Yes, in one sense because He has given me an example to follow. Jesus' example is at the heart of all ministry carried out in His name and for the Church. But there is another aspect that sometimes gets overlooked.

We are more like Peter than any of us care to admit. It is VERY hard for us to let Jesus wash our feet. Even today, isn't it what we do for Jesus and the Church that makes us proud, (in a good sense), and fulfilled? What Jesus showed His apostles in washing their feet was more than an example. It was an act of love for them. It was an act of service for them, an act which would be fully expressed on the cross. Jesus was sharing the eternal love of the Father with them.....a love that would carry them in the midst of their own discipleship.....a love that would support them and strengthen them as they laid down their lives for the sake of the Gospel. They did not know it at the time, but they would come to know it as they embarked upon their role in "making disciples of all nations."

Jesus often asks us, perhaps in subtle ways, "Will you let me wash your feet? Will you let me minister to you? Will you let me serve you? We are often faithful in serving the Lord by our lives, by our work, by our ministry, but we so often do it alone as if it all depended upon us. We are

people who are very self-sufficient. In many ways, it is a false sense of humility – a twisted image of obedience. Think about it, how do we all view the monotony, the burdens, the challenges, the tediousness and the trials that never seem to go away? Do we face them alone or do we let Jesus “wash our feet?”

Imagine what Jesus experienced in doing the will of the Father. He let the Father “wash His feet.” Jesus let the Father minister to Him so that He could wash the feet of others. Jesus himself said that He only does what He sees the Father do.

In John 5:19, we hear: *Jesus answered and said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also.*

For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed.”

In the mystery of it all, Jesus received deeply from His Father so that He could not only wash the feet of His apostles, but so that He could embrace the cross that was ahead of Him, the place where we are all called to follow, and where we will join Him on Good Friday. It is this love that you and I are invited to receive as we wash the feet of others who come our way.

I dare to say that we will be challenged to wash the feet of others with great ease and with great love, if we do not allow Jesus to wash our feet. The burdens of ministry and serving others will be dominant and will overshadow the love that Jesus is offering us, and every task, routine or not, will not be of redeeming, supernatural value as Catherine Doherty says, because we will be less united to Christ.

Therefore we pray for the grace to let Jesus wash our feet....because this love comes from the heart of the Father, and there is no greater love, as He shares such intimacy with us. It is this love for us that will always inspire us to great things and lead us to “dare to love.”

I want to conclude with some words spoken by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to the young people in preparation for the 22nd World Youth Day in 2007:

“My dear young friends, I want to invite you to “dare to love”. Love is the only force capable of changing the heart of the human person and of all humanity, by making fruitful the relations between men and women, between rich and poor, between cultures and civilizations.

Do not desire anything less for your life than a love that is strong and beautiful and that is capable of making the whole of your existence a joyful undertaking of giving yourselves as a gift to God and your brothers and sisters, in imitation of the One who vanquished hatred and death for ever through love.” (cf. Rev 5:13)

My friends, there is “No Greater “Love.”

Thank you for your great support to CSS and to the Diocese of Rapid City. Have a grace filled Holy Week. God bless you all.