In the Catholic Church, few celebrations are as profound and moving as the “Missa in Coena Domini” of Holy Thursday. This Mass, which opens the Paschal Triduum, invites us to enter into the very mystery of God’s love, manifested in the Eucharist, in the priesthood, and in the commandment of charity. But how did this celebration come to be? Why is it so vital today? Let us journey through its origins, history, and significance to rediscover it with a heart open to grace.

Origins of the “Missa in Coena Domini”

The term “Missa in Coena Domini” literally means “Mass of the Lord’s Supper.” It is the liturgical commemoration of the Last Supper, when Jesus, before His Passion, gave His Body and Blood to the apostles under the signs of bread and wine.

The roots of this celebration are found in the very heart of the Gospel. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) recount the institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper, while the Gospel of John, although it does not narrate the institution directly, highlights another fundamental act: the washing of the feet.

Already in the early centuries, Christians gathered on the anniversary of the Passion to celebrate these mysteries. However, it was during the 4th and 5th centuries, particularly in Jerusalem and Rome, that a structured liturgy for Holy Thursday began to take shape. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem’s holy sites—especially to the Cenacle on Mount Zion—emphasized the special character of this day.

In the early Roman liturgy, Holy Thursday was characterized by two key elements: the reconciliation of penitents (those who had completed their public penance) and the celebration of the Eucharist in memory of the Lord’s institution.

The Development of the Celebration Throughout History

By the Middle Ages, the “Missa in Coena Domini” acquired a solemn character. It was customary for bishops and abbots to wash the feet of twelve poor men, imitating Christ’s humility. This rite, known as the “Mandatum” (from Christ’s words: *Mandatum novum do vobis*, “A new commandment I give you,” John 13:34), became an integral part of the liturgy.

During this period, the Eucharistic procession began to gain importance. After the Mass, the Blessed Sacrament was reserved with great solemnity in an altar of repose, where the faithful were invited to watch and pray, in memory of Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane.

An interesting historical note: in the early centuries, there was no celebration of Mass on Good Friday or Holy Saturday. Thus, the faithful were encouraged to receive Communion from the hosts consecrated on Holy Thursday. This deepened the importance of the “Missa in Coena Domini” as the last Eucharistic celebration before the Resurrection.

In the Tridentine reform (16th century), Pope Pius V standardized the Holy Thursday rites, and the washing of the feet became optional but recommended, usually performed after Mass. The Mass itself began to be celebrated in the evening, more closely aligning it with the Gospel narrative.

The Rich Theological Meaning of the “Missa in Coena Domini”

At the heart of this celebration lies a threefold mystery:

1. **The Institution of the Eucharist**: Jesus gives Himself as food, fulfilling His promise: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (John 6:56). The Eucharist is not merely a symbol; it is the real and substantial presence of Christ, offered out of love to nourish our souls.
2. **The Institution of the Ministerial Priesthood**: By telling His apostles, “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19), Christ not only institutes the Eucharist but also ordains the first priests. Holy Thursday is, therefore, the “birthday” of the priesthood, a day of profound thanksgiving for the gift of ordained ministry.
3. **The Commandment of Charity**: Through the washing of the feet, Jesus teaches that true greatness is found in serving others. Love, humble and concrete, is the distinguishing mark of the Christian. The “mandatum novum” challenges us: Are we willing to love as Christ loves?

These three dimensions — the Eucharist, the priesthood, and charity — are inseparable. Without charity, the Eucharist is emptied of meaning; without the Eucharist, charity lacks supernatural nourishment; without the priesthood, the Eucharist cannot be perpetuated through history.

Pastoral and Spiritual Reflections for Today

In today’s world, where individualism often isolates and superficiality trivializes the sacred, the “Missa in Coena Domini” shines like a lighthouse.

- **Rediscovering the Eucharist**: Many Catholics have lost a sense of the real presence

of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Holy Thursday is a powerful call to renew Eucharistic amazement, recognizing the infinite humility of a God who becomes Bread.
- **Praying for Priests**: In an era marked by scandals and a loss of credibility, it is urgent to support priests with prayer, affection, and understanding. They are fragile vessels chosen to carry the most precious treasure: Christ Himself.
- **Living Authentic Charity**: The foot-washing is not a mere reenactment; it is a school of life. Every Christian is called to “wash the feet” of their brothers and sisters: to forgive, to serve, to welcome the marginalized.

Liturgical Highlights of the Celebration

The “Missa in Coena Domini” is marked by several distinctive liturgical elements:

- **The Gloria**: After the silence of Lent, the “Gloria” resounds with the ringing of bells and organ, which then fall silent until the Easter Vigil, underlining the drama of the Passion.
- **The Procession to the Altar of Repose**: At the end of Mass, the Blessed Sacrament is carried in procession to a richly adorned altar, where adoration continues until midnight, inviting the faithful to “watch and pray” with Jesus.
- **The Stripping of the Altars**: After the procession, the altars are stripped of all cloths, crosses are covered or removed, symbolizing the abandonment of Christ and the desolation of the Church awaiting the Resurrection.

A Call to the Heart

Participating in the “Missa in Coena Domini” is not just attending a beautiful ceremony. It is entering into the very heart of the mystery of faith. It is allowing oneself to be loved by Christ, to be fed by His Body and Blood, to be washed by His humble love, and to respond by giving one’s life in service to others.

Today, more than ever, we need Christians who live from the Eucharist and radiate authentic love in the world. Holy Thursday is not a memory of the past but a call to live the Gospel radically in the here and now.

May this Holy Thursday, as we kneel before the altar of repose and hear the Lord whisper again, “Do this in memory of me,” our hearts burn anew with love for the Eucharist, for the priesthood, and for every brother and sister entrusted to us.