“Sine dominico non possumus.”

Homily for Holy Thursday 2019 at St. Paul Cathedral in Yakima, Washington USA
Most Rev. Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! “Without the Lord we cannot live!” “Sine dominico non possumus.” That’s the response given by the fourth century Christian Emeritus to the Roman proconsul in the North African town of Abitene.

On this solemn Holy Thursday permit me to meditate with you on the centrality of the Eucharist for the early Christians. At the beginning of the fourth century, Christian worship was still forbidden by the imperial Roman authorities. The emperor Diocletian ordered that “the sacred texts and holy testaments of the Lord and the divine Scriptures be found, so that they could be burnt; the Lord’s basilicas were to be pulled down and the celebration of sacred rites and holy reunions of the Lord were to be prohibited.” (Acts of the Martyrs, I)

Among those disobeying the emperor’s orders, a group of 49 Christians from Abitene who included Senator Dativus, the priest Saturninus the virgin Victoria and the reader Emeritus. They gathered weekly rotating through different homes to celebrate Sunday Eucharist. The day of their arrest in 303 A.D. they were at the home of Octavius Felix. Having been arrested they were taken into Carthage to Proconsul Anulinus for interrogation.

When the proconsul asked them if they kept the scriptures in their homes, the martyrs courageously answered that “they kept them in their hearts,” thus revealing that they did not wish to separate faith from life. During their torture and torment, the martyrs uttered exclamations such as “I implore you, Christ hear me,” “I thank you, O God,” “I implore you, Christ have mercy.” Along with their prayers they offered their lives and asked that their executioners be forgiven.

Among the testimonies they gave is that of Emeritus and it is his quote that the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI lifted to close his apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist. The proconsul asked Emeritus, “Why have you received Christians in your home, transgressing the imperial dispositions?” Emeritus answered, “Sine dominico non possumus.” This response of Emeritus can be translated in two different ways for “dominico” means both “Lord” and “Sunday.” “Without Sunday we cannot live!” “Without the Lord we cannot live.”

How can we possible live without the Lord? How can we possibly live without the worship of the Lord’s Day? These two threads can come together this night as we pray and meditate before the Blessed Sacrament. The famous lyrics of the hymn “Pange Lingua” remind us of how – in the Eucharist – we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity.
Yet the very music and the very worship speak to how this miracle occurs precisely in the context of worship.

Without the Lord we cannot live and without the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist we cannot live. “Sine dominico non possumus.” These two threads of the liturgy and the Lord come together with our devotion following this Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper. For in the Eucharist we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity. We receive his life. Yet this life of the Eucharist is directly related to worship at Mass where the everyday elements of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ.

In 303 these early Christian witnesses living in Abitene were martyred for their faith during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian. Similarly, our own Holy Father, Pope Francis asks to remember the modern-day martyrs like those of Abitene who are persecuted for their faith. Pope Francis recently made a short video on this topic that is posted on our Diocese of Yakima Facebook page. Likewise, tomorrow’s Good Friday collection for the Holy Land reminds us of how difficult it is today to maintain our Christian presence in the Holy Land.

May we resolve this Holy Thursday to united ourselves to the great witness of faith – those of fourth century Abitene – and those living their faith in dangerous conditions today. May we pray for them. May we support them. May their witness deepen within us the reality that like them, we too cannot live without the Eucharist. We too cannot live without the Lord. We too cannot live without this night’s worship of God in our midst. Peace be with you!