These are exciting days in our Church ... not only because of the grand liturgies that we celebrate during this, the holiest week of the year, but also because we and the world are witness to how the new pope, Francis, is bringing a breath of fresh air to the sacred events. He’s already shown some noted breaks with traditions - in his apparel (black vs. red shoes), in his housing (at the hotel vs. the papal apartments), and even with his humor (as when he prayed that the cardinals who elected him would be forgiven for what they had done). And this very evening, Pope Francis is celebrating Holy Thursday not in a basilica but in a youth detention center.

The world’s attention may now be focused on the novelty of the pope’s shoes or rooms or jokes, but what will benefit people in the long run, and what should compel our attention, is what he says. His various talks give evidence of a learned churchman, but it is not erudition that he communicates. His is the speech of lived pastoral experience, with an appeal to serve others. To give you just one powerful image ... in the Chrism Mass at the Vatican he spoke of priests needing to be “shepherds living with ‘the smell of the sheep’, shepherds in the midst of their flock ....” I dare say, no other paper has ever painted such a picture!

Now, I have no pretense about emulating the charisma of the new pope. (Nor will I make any olfactory comments!) But I would like to extend his image and his words from the Chrism Mass to another great celebration this week - this evenin’gs Mass of the Lord’s Supper.

One of the insights that Pope Francis shared with the clergy at the Chrism Mass was this: It is neither in soul-searching introspection, nor in managerial oversight that we who are clergy will encounter the Lord. Such approaches to our life and work, he says, lead us “to become pelagians and minimize the power of grace.” Instead, he says, grace “comes alive and flourishes to the extent that we, in faith, go out and give ourselves and the Gospel to others ....”
Go out and give! This evening, we focus on what it is we give. We celebrate the gift that St. Paul plainly describes in our second reading. For at that Last Supper, “on the night He was himself handed over” to those who would execute him, Jesus first hands over to his apostles His own body and blood, that they might “do this in remembrance of [Him]” and hand it on in proclamation of “the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:23-26).

Go out and give, the pope reminds us. What we do is not simply provide comfort or counsel. We are not just ministers; we are priests. We are not like the rest of the people of God; we have been ordained to serve them. And we serve them best not by teaching or administrating, but by giving them a gift, the grace of God in the Eucharist and all the sacraments. What we give is not our own; it is God’s gift – given to us all in the redemption of the world.

Now, that’s not to say that priests are an elite class, that ours is a life set on a pedestal above and beyond the quotidian realities that every person must face and grapple with in this world. On the contrary, to repeat Pope Francis’ image, we are to be “shepherds living with ‘the smell of the sheep’.” That picture, unpleasant though it may appear to be (and un-complimentary as it is to the sheep!), that is dramatized in this evening’s Gospel, in the Lord’s exemplary act of washing the feet of his disciples. And that is not merely the modeling of an attitude of or approach to service; it is an action inextricably linked to the gift of Himself that He gives at the Last Supper.

To be givers of the gift of Christ, to be servant ministers of the sacrament of Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist – this is who we are. It requires of us that we live and act as His priests in all that we do, especially in the liturgy, so as to maximize God’s grace in the world. That is also our offering, our oblation to God; it is our Oblate-ness and our religious mission in the world.

But to be a gift, what is given must also be received. Peter learns this rather abruptly, when his initial refusal to allow the Master to wash his feet is met with the prospect of his being left out of the inheritance. For him, as for us, docility to the divine will remains decisive.

So, too, does this sacrament. For Jesus does not merely institute the Eucharist. He gives it. He shares it. He hands it on – to all of us – just as he himself is handed over – to die for all humanity. And He tells us to eat and drink. This is how we, together, remember him. This is how we, as individuals and as a community, proclaim him. This is how we are personally united with Him, and He with us.

There is nothing greater that we can do – as givers and receivers, as believers, as Church – than share in this Eucharist. It’s why we end each liturgy, and how I now end this homily, by saying with all our minds and hearts and souls: “Thanks be to God.”

REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S.