

The Holiest Place

- *Holy Thursday*
- *April 21, 2011*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Two weeks ago, on another Thursday, a beautiful early spring day, when I was in our Nation's Capital, I set out to find the holiest place in America. I walked from the foot of the Capitol, with the Supreme Court behind it, holy enough because it's where our laws are made and our freedoms protected. I walked right down the middle of the Mall with the American Indian Museum, the National Gallery of Art, the National Archives, and the Smithsonian to either side; all holy places honoring the original people of our land, the treasure of our beauty and history, and the founding documents enshrining our values, but not yet my goal of the holiest place in America. As I pressed my pilgrimage forward I approached what is still holier: The Holocaust Memorial honoring six million lives exterminated; the Washington Monument of the father of our country; the White House, home of the one leader we all elect; the Memorial to Jefferson, the intelligent mentor of our nation's values; the solemn World War II Memorial; and the still more somber Vietnam War Memorial with the haunting etchings of those thousands of names of American soldiers killed in a questionable war. I was getting closer to my goal.

At last I marched up the steps to what I consider the holiest place in America: the Lincoln Memorial. There Abraham Lincoln sits peacefully looking out on America, back along the Mall, at all of our history, our values, freedoms, lives lost, and on all of us. Flanked on either side by two scriptures—as we are this day—the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address, both of them pondering the will and the mercy of God, there is inscribed above Abe: “Here in this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the nation, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.” I turned around, moved by what speaks most forcefully of what is holy in America, with Abraham Lincoln looking over my shoulder, and I walked a few feet and stood on the spot where Dr. Martin Luther King on August 28, 1963, gave his “I have a Dream” speech. I felt in me how the holy in history moves forward, continues in us, and appeals through us to the future.

We have arrived this evening from a similar pilgrimage to our Holy Thursday, recalling what set us free from sin and keeps us free, aware of those of our own families who have died in faith and instilled faith in us, passing by in remembrance the inhumanities in which we share and of which we repent. We have come to the Memorial Table, the Memorial Meal, not to find a statue of our Liberator, but Jesus Christ himself, here present, inviting us to be washed by him, to share in his life-giving meal, and to enter with him into the act of our salvation. If there were an inscription high up on the wall above our altar, it would read: “Here in this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the world, the memory of Jesus of Nazareth is enshrined forever.” Welcome to the holiest place in the world. We come here on an evening of remembering, and of communion, and of strengthening in faith to go the whole way of his pilgrimage to his death for us and his life for and in us. Welcome to this Holy Thursday.

What makes the Lincoln Memorial the holiest place in America—at least in my view though you may have another—is that in both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, it celebrates liberation—from slavery and discrimination—it calls in both of them for binding together in union peoples separated, and in both Abe and Martin it is made holy, sanctified, by their deaths, by their blood shed for others. This too in the deepest and most ultimate way, not now for a nation but for all people of all times, is what makes this Thursday holy. It is the supper of liberation, both from Egypt and in the washing of our sinfulness; the sacrament of union with God and with one another in Jesus; it is the anticipation in the original meal of the death, the shedding of blood, of Jesus, and in our meal the actualization of his sacrificial death once and for all which gives us life once and for all.

I marched up the Mall to Abraham and to Martin with the flood of American people wanting to make themselves whole and good and free and holy by our own efforts, our American temptation. But when I got to the shrine I was humbled that our wholeness, goodness, freedom, and union are given to us by them, by their sacrifice, by the gift of their lives, their greatness crushed, and dying, and falling, and finding fruit in us. Who we are as a people is not so much of our doing but of our receiving and passing on. So also the washing of the feet to which we submit ourselves tonight is accepting that we cannot purify ourselves, make ourselves holy, but are made clean by Christ, and that we do not accomplish our union, but we are given communion both with God and with one another, by Jesus Christ. We could just as well have called this “Humble Thursday” as Holy Thursday. What Jesus asks of us tonight is “Will you accept?”, “Will you accept?”, “Will you accept that I make you clean; will you accept that I make you one; will you accept my death for you; will you accept that I give you my life in God?”, “Will you accept my holiness rather than your own?”

We enter—stooping low in humility to enter through the low door of this Holy Thursday—into the holy three days of this day, tomorrow’s Good Friday, and Saturday which rises into Sunday, from darkness into the Day of the Lord. As I took that walk past the monuments of our founding, our freedom, and our sinfulness to the holiest place in America, make your own journey, walk your own pilgrimage, to this Holy Thursday. Just make sure you get here so that you can humbly accept being made holy by the Holy One. It is indeed good to be here. “In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the world, the memory of Jesus of Nazareth is enshrined forever.” Let us accept and then let us turn and walk forward, proclaiming “I have a dream”, to look to the East, toward the rising Sun. Welcome again from wherever you have come to the holiest place in the world.