



Photo by Andrew Lewis

The washing of the feet at the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper demonstrates our call and challenge to serve and bring mercy to all in need.

Risking Our Lives in Faith: Taking Up the Call to Serve

Ronald Patrick Raab

We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.

—Entrance Antiphon for Holy Thursday

This Entrance Antiphon for Holy Thursday charts our path toward Easter victory. The antiphon not only proclaims our destination to the Resurrection of Christ but provides the direction on how to get to the empty tomb of Christ Jesus on Easter morning. Holy Thursday inherently proclaims the Paschal Mystery as we begin these solemn days of the Sacred Triduum.

As pastoral ministers, we begin our ministry connecting the reality of people's lives to the assurance of Jesus' Passion, Death, and Resurrection. During Holy Week, we root our ministries even more in the ways our people long for the salvation won for us within the Eucharist. We cannot depend on last year's liturgy preparation to convert our hearts this year. To connect again with the Eucharist and our responsibility to serve people in need we must sift through each aspect of the parish's Holy Thursday liturgy.

A HUMBLE GESTURE OF HOSPITALITY

The passage of John's Gospel (13:1–15) for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper uniquely connects Eucharist and service. John emphasizes the profound yet humble gesture of hospital-

ity, the washing of feet. Jesus offers us this gesture on the night before he died so that his Real Presence may be among people who need to be welcomed into community. This gesture in our liturgy reveals the challenge and the call to be among the sick, the lonely, the blind, and the lame. The mission of the Church unites the Holy Eucharist and God's revealing love and our vocation to live this love in our world, especially among the marginalized and estranged.

Jesus still invites people to learn what it means to bend down to wash another's feet to offer healing and mercy to people lost by sin and division. Jesus washes feet today through our faith and service, relinquishing people from labels such as "homeless," "mentally ill," or "addict." The washing of feet reveals to us that our faith is a matter of the human heart that is broken open and shared in human relationships. This action of washing feet within the Church brings mercy to people and releases those who minister from false power and selfish authority.

In preparation for preaching and for foot washing within every community on Holy Thursday, we must consider some of the reasons why this Gospel calls us into the ritual sign of humble service. Pastoral ministers labor diligently and, even unknowingly, for our parishioners and strangers who are weak, sick, and grieving. This ritual action of foot washing provides the grace of humility for all who shepherd within our Church. As pastoral leaders, we cannot fix the reasons why people need to have their feet washed. The act of washing becomes a way of anointing their feet in love, bringing Jesus into the trauma, loss,

or heartache of people's lives. Foot washing is sacred, a way into the mystery of dying and rising.

As a pastor and homilist, I need to wash feet as much as people need to have their feet washed. This action is a mutual moment of humility that changes the way I relate to people on a daily basis. Washing dirty feet is humbling for the servant who washes, caresses, and dries the feet of people who are fragile, poor, or grieving. This ritual action removes any judgment about why these feet are dirty in the first place. This is especially true for those who present their needs in so many ways. Foot washing becomes an image of the real, hard work of service toward the marginalized and broken that has taken place within our communities all year.

Ritual foot washing is also a way to capture a glimpse of the individual faces of those who are hurting. This has been an important element of this ritual for me as a priest. I have knelt down in the aisles of many communities to take the feet of suffering people into my hands. During this holy moment, I look up into the eyes of these twelve individuals who struggle to make sense out of their lives, their faith, and their relationships.

Eyes reveal to me the sadness and longing that is carried to the washing bowl on this holy night. The posture of kneeling down on Holy Thursday at the lives of people who need God is one of the most important gestures for the genuine conversion of a pastor. I am often overcome with tears of grief and sorrow for the people in the parish who so need God. I pray not only that their feet are cleansed but also that their sin, doubt, and depression are washed away. The tears of Jesus' beloved also need to be dried with tenderness.

HOLDING SUFFERERS CLOSE

I take to heart the people whom we choose to have their feet washed on Holy Thursday. I remember during the course of the year the faithful woman who sat at the bedside of her dying husband, the woman who washed the body of her beloved before death. I see those who serve people without fanfare, couples who regularly hold newborn children addicted to drugs at a local hospital. I notice men who have survived cancer or children who have survived leukemia. I notice the foster parents who care for children with special needs or soldiers back from war with missing limbs. I am on the lookout for people who have toured the corners of darkness, loneliness, and depression.

AN AWARENESS OF THE REAL PRESENCE

As I pray for these people who will have their feet washed, their lives become a source of grace for my homily preparation. The circumstances of their real humanity are also fertile ground for our people who write the petitions for the Universal Prayer for that evening. The more these particular prayers are rooted in the suffering of the community, the more people will connect the Eucharist with true and loving service.

Last year we invited a man to have his feet washed who has lost his ability to speak. Since suffering a stroke in his early fifties, he has struggled to walk and be present in our community. He and his wife are extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to the homebound, even though he depends on his

wife to care for him in so many ways. His gestures and facial expressions speak volumes.

This frail man was the first to have his feet cleansed as he sat in a chair in the center aisle of the church. One of our seminarians raced to his side to help him take off the braces on his feet and legs. I approached him in loving prayer and bent down to pour warm water from a large urn on his weak, pale feet. As I knelt down on both knees to dry his feet, my eyes were so filled with tears I could hardly see him. I looked up into this face and saw the grace of Jesus healing him, restoring his place and purpose in our community.

As I made my way down the aisle to wash the feet of the other children, women, and men, all heard a loud thud. Everyone gasped. The first man to have his feet washed had collapsed in the pew from his excitement. I raced to him with the Oil of the Sick, which the bishop had blessed two days prior during the Chrism Mass. The congregation waited until the ambulance arrived, and we all seemed to meditate in silence on the enduring, healing, and Real Presence of Jesus.

During the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, we received news that our friend was resting comfortably in the hospital. I now understand that we need this ill man to remind us that suffering gives way to life, and that our bodies ache for the miraculous presence of our Risen Savior. The man's fainting also reminds me that our liturgies must absorb human reality such as illness and discomfort over what happens next. Through him, the Real Presence of Christ taught us to let go of control in our unhealthy quest for perfection. God's grace shows us how to pray and serve.

In the conclusion of Holy Thursday, our parish community processes out the front door of our church and halfway around the block into our parish center. The altar table is in the center of the room and the entire congregation stands around the Eucharist as we pray and wait. We become the Real Presence of Christ among people with clean feet and broken lives, amid the hidden realities of suffering and pain. In this final moment within the liturgy, we understand within our hearts that we simply need God.

Adoration at that moment in every community is soul deep as we seek the blending of our human lives and the divine love that comes once again to set us free. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus compels us to risk our lives in faith. We must break new ground to provide love where consolation has been lost, to live in hope among people where trust has been muted, to offer peace among families just back from war. We glory in the Cross of Jesus in whom we are saved and delivered. The risk of change, faith, love, and service is the beginning again of the Sacred Triduum. ♦

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