

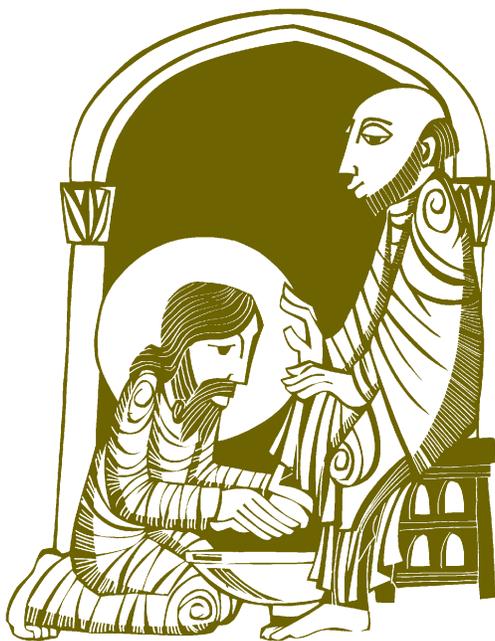
Why Are Feet Washed on Holy Thursday?

Kristopher W. Seaman

During a very blustery winter, my family and I were carefully trying not to slip on the ice as we made our way through a crowded parking lot to the church. Upon entering the worship space, the pastoral associate and pastor asked me to fill in for a person who was frightened to leave the house during the snow storm. I responded with enthusiasm, “I would love to help out! What do you need?” The priest said, “Someone to have their feet washed.” Later on, I remember myself being the one inviting people to have their feet washed on Holy Thursday. One person I asked, because of her profound sense of service on behalf of the parish, responded by saying, “Oh! I don’t know. I would gladly wash people’s feet, because I know how to serve others. I am not very good at people doing things for me.” Both stories embody a sense of service, helping out others by invitation.

The biblical basis for the washing of the feet occurs in the Last Supper narrative, and is only found in the Gospel according to John. At the moment when we expect Jesus to take bread and wine and transform them, as he does in the Gospel accounts of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus in John’s Gospel account gets up and begins to wash feet. Peter first refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet; it should be, as Peter reasoned it, Peter washing Jesus’s feet. Jesus rebukes Peter: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:12-15).

Jesus serves his disciples, and then instructs them to imitate his practice of washing feet. There is a sense of humility. A disciple is to serve others. Because of the context of the washing of the feet in John’s Gospel, there is also a sense of transformation. As disciples, our model, *par excellence*, is Jesus Christ. His practices in scripture provide a model for our



practices as disciples. Jesus knew he was going to be crucified, and gave this practice as a sign for disciples to serve one another. Pope Francis has been receiving a lot of press since his election, and part of this is his profound sense of humble service to all people. He models service in his daily actions.

During his Homily on Holy Thursday evening, Pope Francis remarked that this rite is “a caress of Jesus.” Feet stink, feet were callused and blistered from long walks. In Jesus’s day proper hospitality required the servants to wash the guests’ feet. Jesus, as the host, turns this practice upside down. He bends low and washes the feet of the lowly. He caresses, an act of love. True service wells up from a profound love and faith that seeks to help others daily. The rite of washing feet is called

the *mandatum*, Latin for “commandment.” Jesus summed up the law by saying there are two fundamental commandments: Love God and love one’s neighbor. Loving the neighbor is acting humbly and in service.

Jesus, in John’s Gospel account, offers a meaning of Eucharist: The encounter with Christ Jesus has implications in one’s life. What Jesus did and does for us, we are to do for one another. As Pope Francis remarked: “because this is the real reason why Jesus came: to serve, to help us.”

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