

Lenten Reflection

Holy Thursday, March 24, 2016

By Sister Maria Fest, CDP



On this evening when we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist, our principal biblical passage is taken from the Gospel of John. Unlike the synoptic Gospels, John does not include a story of the institution of the Eucharist. In his gospel, there is no blessing and breaking of the bread, no passing of the bread and cup. Instead, we have an account of Jesus on his knees washing the feet of his Disciples. The institution of the Eucharist, however, is covered in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the evening's first reading. The sequence of these two readings appears to be in right order.

In the account of the institution of the Eucharist, there is a transformation as bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. When Jesus gives us the Eucharist, he uses the words: receive, give thanks, break and share. John's story of the Last Supper illustrates a different kind of transformation. His account reveals the theology behind the breaking of the bread. The foot-washing ritual transforms the Eucharist into an active ritual of servanthood. This ritual specifies what the Eucharist is meant to do—to lead us into the humble service of others. Jesus gives us a personal example of humble forgiveness. With a towel tied around his waist and bending low, he washed and dried the feet of each of each of his disciple, even Judas' feet. This example of Jesus is his last "parable" to his friends—his final teaching or the "last lecture." This magnanimous action would become his legacy of servant leader.

Father Ron Rolheiser, in his book *Sacred Fire; a Vision for Deeper Human and Christian Maturity*, puts a new interpretation on the foot washing aspect of the Last Supper—perhaps one that coincides with Pope Francis's change to the Roman Missal when Pope Francis permitted the "washing of feet" to include any of the "People of God."

Fr. Rolheiser says:

The text that describes Jesus' washing the feet of His disciples is carefully prefaced with these words: "Jesus knowing that the Father had put everything into His hands, and that he come from God, got up from the table and took off his outer garments." When John is describing Jesus "taking off his outer garment," he implies more than just stripping off physical clothing, some outer sash that might get in the way of his stooping

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down and washing someone's feet. In order to let go of the pride that blocks any human being from stooping down to wash the feet of someone different from Himself, Jesus had to strip off a lot of outer things (pride, moral judgments, superiority, ideology, and personal dignity) so as to wear only the inner garment. John mystically describes his inner garment was precisely his knowledge that he had come from God, was going back to God, and therefore all things were possible for Him, including washing the feet of someone whom He knew had already betrayed Him. That is also our own inner garment, the reality that lies deepest beneath our race, gender, religion, language, politics, ideology, and personal history (with all its wounds and false pride). What is most real is that deep down, beneath these other outer things, we are we are imprinted with the brand of love and truth, the inchoate knowledge that, like Jesus, we too have come from God, are returning to God and are capable of acting from that deeper inner space, including washing the feet of someone very different from ourselves. Our inner garment is the image and likeness of God inside us, and when we touch this, we can find the strength to stoop low and wash one another's feet across any divide: liberal-conservative, black-white, Catholic-Protestant, Jew-Muslim, Muslim-Christian, man-woman, saint-sinner, and begin to feel sympathy for one another beyond our wounds and differences.

This evening's readings calls all of us into this mutual service of each other. Not only are we called to wash the feet of others, but to allow others to wash our feet as well. Either way, we need to be humble, forgiving, trusting and loving.

(Ideas for this reflection came from many biblical writers including Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP, Ron Rolheiser, OMI and Henri J. Nouwen)