Opinion
Spirituality



Two parishioners from St. Mary's Church in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, wash the feet of other parishioners April 18, after they themselves had their feet washed by the priest. (CNS/Octavio Duran)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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There are two places in the Scriptures where we find descriptions of Jesus asking his disciples to do something in imitation of him. Of course the first that we would immediately think of is when, at the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and then gave it to his disciples and said, "Take this and eat." Then the cup of wine, he took it and blessed it, "Take and drink for this is my body and blood." Then he said, "Do this in memory of me." But there was also the other time in John's Gospel at the beginning of the Last Supper, Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

June 23, 2019

Genesis 14:18-20

Psalm 110

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Luke 9:11b-17

I'm sure we all remember this incident and how Peter at one point said, "No, no, you can't wash my feet." He wouldn't let Jesus humble himself to do it. Jesus said, "If I don't wash your feet you have nothing to do with me." So Peter said, "OK." Then at the end when Jesus had finished washing their feet, he put on his other garment again and said to the disciples, "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Master' and 'Lord' and you are right for that is what I am. If I've been your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also must wash one another's feet in memory of me. I have given you an example so that you should also do as I have done."

Now I'm sure that all of us are very aware of the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. When Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me," we sacralized it, made it a sacrament, and we gather each week around the altar to do what Jesus had done. We make Jesus present unto the form of bread and wine. We spend time in adoration of Jesus. People will come to some parishes every night, all night for

adoration, a few people an hour at a time. But that other command: Do as I have done to you, serve one another. Even the most humble of service — washing each other's feet — how well do we carry out that command of Jesus to imitate him?

In fact, when we look closely at our second lesson today, we discover that that account of the Last Supper was written by Paul because he was very angry with the Christians of Corinth. They really were not doing the Eucharist in a way that caused them to remember Jesus and what his offering meant where he gave his very life, suffering and death, and then resurrection from death and made that our sacrament. St. Paul is very angry, in fact, when he writes to the church at Corinth.

Before that passage that we heard today, here is what he says, "In the following instructions I do not praise you." (He's talking to the church gathered like we are gathered here.) "I don't praise you, because your meetings for worship do more harm than good. First, as I've heard, when you gather together there are divisions among you. There are different groups among you to show which of you have God's approval. But for that reason your supper is no longer the gathering of the supper of the Lord, for each one brings his own food and while one is hungry, the other is getting drunk. Do you not have homes in which to eat and drink? Perhaps you despise the church of God and desire to humiliate those who have nothing. What shall I say? Shall I praise you? No, certainly I cannot praise you."

What was happening? To make it clear, when the early Christians gathered as St. Paul describes to celebrate the Eucharist, they would be in someone's home. In Corinth there was a Roman colony and there was a home that would have to be large for a number of people to gather and it was built in a Roman style where there were two sections, a smaller section where people came first and were served the best food and drink.

As Paul said, "They ate and drank until some were drunk." It was a disgrace. Others who came later were kept apart. They were given the barest, the most meager amount of food, barest amount possible. And Paul says, "What you're doing is destroying the very thing the Eucharist is supposed to do. It's supposed to bring us together: one bread, one body, the body of Christ, and you're tearing it apart." And it's then that Paul goes on to describe what happened at the Last Supper and said, "This is the tradition I pass on to you."

We, as we gather for this Eucharist, have to ask ourselves how well we are living out what Jesus intends by the Eucharist, how well we are living out that part of the Last Supper where Jesus made himself the slave, the servant of all? How well are we living out that part where he goes out to serve others? It's one thing to adore Jesus under the form of bread and wine, but isn't it a more important thing to worship Jesus by serving him and those in whom he lives? "When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink. When I was naked you clothed me, in prison you visited me. When I was a refugee you brought me home. When? Whenever you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me."

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You see, Jesus is present certainly in the Blessed Sacrament and we can adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. It's the real presence—body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus. But we also are called to do what Jesus did at the Last Supper —serve our brothers and sisters. You don't have to kneel in silence for hours in order to be in the presence of Jesus. You can go out on the street corner and help someone who is begging and you're serving Jesus, you're coming into contact with him.

We can welcome migrants into our country, and we're serving Jesus. Instead of saying we're going to find all of those that have managed to get in — we've got to put them out — we would welcome them, because Jesus is present in them. That first community at Corinth understood the Blessed Sacrament as being the presence of the real Jesus — body, soul and divinity, but they should also have remembered that other part of that evening meal where he served his disciples as a servant by washing their feet, reaching out to bring his love in a very tender way to each person. And that is how Jesus acted throughout his life.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Blessed Sacrament, Corpus Christi, body of Christ. But we must celebrate it not only by gathering around this altar and sharing in this celebration, receiving the body and blood of Jesus sacramentally, and being nurtured and nourished by that, but we must also go out from here and serve Jesus and our brothers and sisters. Wherever we find anyone in need, we find Jesus. Those first Christians at Corinth got it wrong and St. Paul had to harshly criticize them. I hope we reflect carefully on how Jesus is present to us, not only in the Blessed Sacrament, but in anyone who is in need, who comes to us. I hope we welcome them as Jesus did: "Whatever you do for the least of my brothers or sisters, you do for

me."

Editor's note: *This homily was given June 23 at St. Ambrose Church, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*