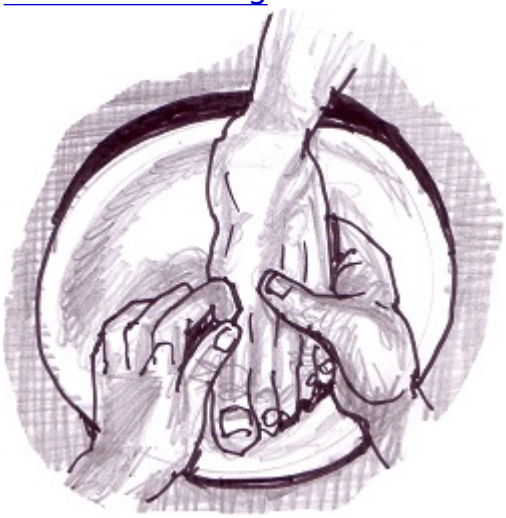
Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me” (John 13:8).

Holy Thursday

Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; *1 Cor 11:23-26*; *Jn 13:1-15*

There are many details worth noting in this familiar account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper.

The first is that it substitutes a profound example of service for the institution of the Eucharist presented in the synoptic Gospels. Written a generation after them, the author of the fourth Gospel may have felt it was unnecessary to repeat the ritual of the bread and wine, or he may have wanted instead to emphasize the core meaning of the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup as signs of the sacrificial death of Jesus.

We know from our own experience of attending Mass that even the mystery of the Eucharist and our reception of Communion can become so familiar that they become invisible. We go through the motions, and it requires little of us to go to Communion.

But an annual washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, especially where whole communities are invited to participate, is a very personal exercise in humility, both for the one washing and the one being washed. It brings the liturgical symbols down to unfamiliar acts of removing our shoes and stockings in public, anticipating our turn to kneel before a fellow parishioner to bathe and dry their feet, then being served in the same way.

Yet as ritual only, we are hard pressed to enter the role of a slave in first century culture, where the lowest household servant performed the duty of washing the dusty feet of guests who wore sandals. By taking this role himself, Jesus must have shocked his disciples into acknowledging the anonymous persons who did such tasks, like the hotel house staffs, waiters, sanitation workers and countless other servants who make our world run.

Jesus wanted his disciples, and us, to see him in every act of service and in everyone who serves, and to be servants to one another. This was the day to day laying down our lives for the community that defines Christian love.

Another noteworthy detail in this story is that in the previous chapter, Jesus himself learned the power of this act of love when Mary bathed and anointed his feet at Bethany (John 12:1-15). Was this experience what inspired him to repeat the gesture at the Last Supper? If so, a woman gave the church the central model for humble service as the key to leadership.

Finally, we note that the lesson of love shared in the washing of feet was also performed for Judas, Jesus' betrayer. Only after this, during the meal, does Jesus reveal to Judas that he knows what will transpire, even saying to him, "Do it quickly" (John 13:30).

Today's Gospel passage focuses on the exchange between Jesus and Peter, who at first refuses to accept this essential sign of baptism. But Jesus and Judas must also have looked into each other eyes as Jesus knelt before him. In that final, intimate exchange, both knew what was going to happen, even as Jesus washed his feet. The depth of the service and the power of the sign were fixed. A disciple is to wash even the feet of the one who is ready to betray him. The Eucharist is complete not just as a love feast but as the table of reconciliation where sinners and enemies meet in the mercy of God.

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