

Bishop Morlino & the Mandatum

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 3, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

Pope Francis has called our Church to go to the peripheries of life and be ambassadors of God's mercy there. On Tuesday, a group of bishops went to the periphery of the U.S., literally, celebrating a Mass a few feet from the fence that divides the U.S. from Mexico. They prayed for those who have lost their lives trying to cross the border. They pleaded for Congress to pass humane immigration reform. It is too soon to know if their actions will have a political effect, but every Latino Catholic understood that whatever the U.S. Congress does, the bishops of the Catholic Church will stand in solidarity with the immigrants and try to ameliorate the sufferings they endure.

The bishops said they were following the example of Pope Francis, who went to the island of Lampedusa last year, the place where many African immigrants die trying to get into Europe. But, the bishops are not monkeys following the example of Pope Francis. They were not primarily following the pope's example at all. They were, like him, following the example and the urging of the Master who Himself went out to the highways and byways of life and instructed his apostles to do the same.

Pope Francis has also called the Church to be less self-referential and less concerned with small-minded rules. The day before the bishops said Mass at the border, the [Wisconsin State Journal reported](#) [1] that Madison Bishop Robert Morlino reiterated his decree that within his diocese, the Mandatum Rite, at which the presider washes the feet of twelve people in imitation of Jesus' washing the feet of the apostles at the Last Supper, must not include women or, in the alternative, the presider should dispense with the rite entirely. Perhaps Bishop Morlino thinks that only men get dirty feet.

Seriously, why would Morlino do this?

Perhaps he is concerned with the integrity of the rite. All of us have, in the past few decades, been exposed to a priest who thinks the liturgy belongs just to him. Badly improvised additions or subtractions to the noble simplicity of the Roman Rite are a distraction to the faithful and, usually, miscarry. Liturgy is organic, resistant to innovations that do not unite celebrant and people but, instead, result in the celebrant having to explain the symbolism of his newly devised actions. It is like those bizarre Opening Ceremonies at the Olympics: If a symbol needs to be explained, it is not very effective as a symbol, and symbols that do not require explanation emerge slowly, over time, organically.

Still, rubricism, an overwrought concern to follow the rubrics in the liturgy, is a perfect example of the kind of self-referential Church obsessed with small minded rules that the Holy Father has spoken against. Rubricism also can distract from rather than facilitate the prayer of the Church at Mass.

I have no problem with a bishop washing the feet of twelve members of the clergy. Here, the symbolism of Jesus washing the feet of the twelve apostles is exactly represented. But, once you start washing the feet of lay people, that particular symbolism is gone. Then, restricting the rite to men only seems difficult to explain and the suspicion grows that it is mere sexism.

The most disturbing part of Bishop Morlino's decree was the suggestion that a parish could dispense with the rite entirely. What? The liturgies of the Sacred Triduum are among the most ancient in the Church precisely because of the solemnity of what those liturgies recall. It is a "law" of liturgical history that the more solemn the rite, the more likely it is to be unchanged since ancient times. This law is found nowhere in the canons of the Church; It has to do with human nature. It is why families are allergic to the idea of eating something other than turkey at Thanksgiving or lamb at Easter. Our traditions help define who we are as a people and at no time do Christians more clearly identify who they are than in the Triduum.

The Mandatum Rite is not only ancient, it is essential. And, it is beautiful, arguably one of the most beautiful rites the Church possesses. Jesus washed the feet of the apostles to explain to them what was to follow. How are we, or our children, to make sense of the sacrifice of Good Friday without the prior instruction of the Mandatum Rite on Holy Thursday? The self-emptying of God in Jesus Christ was not a one-off. Jesus wanted His followers to follow, and while the apostles would indeed follow Him to their own crosses, He wanted them to love one another, to be identified by their love, and to make service the essence of that love. And, so, He washed their feet. And, so, we must learn to wash each others' feet. Doing away with the rite evidences a degree of liturgical innovation that is as unparalleled as it is mind-boggling.

And why? One fears the answer to that question is that Bishop Morlino wants to make a point. He is requiring a "boys only" ritual or the removal of the rite entirely because he can. Here is the culture of clericalism at its worst. Here is yet another bishop who thinks that he is above the considerations of others, that his opinion, and this is obviously no more than a theological opinion, is wiser than that of anyone else. "I have a zucchetto on my head and can do whatever I want." It is repugnant and one need hardly point out that this mentality has not served the Church well in other areas of ecclesial leadership.

We have had other examples of bishops in the public square in recent weeks. Bishop Gerald Barnes of San Bernardino and Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane both instructed their diocesan charities and parishes to help the poor sign up for health insurance, newly available under the terms of the Affordable Care Act. Both made clear that they continue to oppose the regulation promulgated by the Department of Health and Human Services regarding contraception coverage. But, they also made clear that helping people, especially the poor, get health insurance was an act of mercy that commended itself to those who invoke the name of Christ. As someone who went without health insurance for a few years, I can attest to the fear that is created when you wonder what you will do when you fall or get sick and lack health insurance. It is crippling. Blessings on these bishops and their Catholic Charities and other Church workers who helped the poor of their diocese get health insurance.

In recent days we have witnessed Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta issue a frank and forthright public apology to his people for failing to perceive how the archdiocese's purchase of a large home for him would impact the people of God. I was especially struck by the fact that Archbishop Gregory thanked the people of God for correcting him and his associates who had failed to see the damage to the Church's mission by having a chief shepherd living in swanky digs. Yes, Archbishop Gregory should have seen this coming but, as Pope Francis has said, we should not be so afraid of making mistakes as we should be of failing to acknowledge the mistakes we make.

This past year, with all that has been written about Pope Francis, it is impossible to deny the man's charisma, but that is not really the secret to why so many people are drawn to him. It is not his charisma, but his charism, that attracts. He does the kinds of things that evidence he is truly following Jesus. His words ring true because they come to us after we watched him carry his own luggage, pay his own hotel bill, ride in a simple car not a limo. He appears to be not only a holy man but a healthy one, comfortable in his own skin. But, the source of the attraction is deeper. We are attracted to Pope Francis because he attracts us to Him. I will leave it to others to discern which bishops noted above are, like Francis, evidencing the Master's way, truth and life. And, I

encourage the nuncio and the Congregation of Bishops to recognize that our Church needs more bishops who are willing to follow the example of Francis because it is the example of the Lord.

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[1] http://host.madison.com/wsj/lifestyles/faith-and-values/religion/in-the-spirit-diocesan-ban-on-washing-women-s-feet/article_ab677162-82ca-5314-9f53-244bc0348901.html