

Once again, John's gospel gives us a beautiful, provocative, multi-layered text for our prayer this holy night. At the Mass we traditionally think of as 'the night Jesus gave us the Eucharist,' John does not tell us the story of Jesus breaking bread and blessing a cup and saying 'this is my body, this is my blood.' Rather, he gives us a rich theology of the Eucharist, and who we are as the Body of Christ.

First, we are told that Jesus takes off his outer garments – the Greek actually says He 'lays aside' His outer robe, ties a towel around Himself, pours water into a basin and washes the disciples' feet. At the time, foot washing was seen as a mark of hospitality, but a menial task generally performed by slaves to welcome a dignitary hosted by the slave's master. To the disciples it would have been an unmistakable demonstration of humility, something an inferior would do for a superior. Raymond Brown calls it 'a loving act of abasement.'

Jesus' odd gesture offers the disciples – and us -- a symbol of service and self-gift, prefiguring the total act of service and self-gift that comes with His death on the cross. Indeed, the Greek word for Jesus' 'laying aside' (*tithesin*) His outer robe is the same used – several times – when Jesus earlier speaks of Himself as the Good Shepherd who 'lays down' His life for His flock. Jesus lays *everything* down for others in service to God – His outer garment and, then, His inner garment – His very body.

When Jesus approaches Peter to wash his feet, Peter expresses confusion, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus says that though Peter may not understand what He is doing now, it will become clear later. Still, Peter protests: "You will never wash my feet!" That response has always seemed to me infinitely sad; knowing that Jesus may die, Peter is consumed with sorrow, perhaps thinking, *Lord, how much will you lower yourself? At least avoid this humiliation.* Peter's comment is not a command as much as a loving plea. It's similar to watching a friend doing something that seems humiliating. To give it a contemporary spin, imagine going to a wedding and seeing the bride and groom having to clean up an overturned trash can at their wedding reception, because no one else will. We would say, like Peter, "Don't DO that!"

But perhaps it is even more radical than that. In her book *WRITTEN THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE*, Sandra Schneiders, IHM, a New Testament scholar, suggests another possible meaning. She believes that in John's Gospel the Foot Washing is more about the mutual service of friendship, a mutual sharing of gifts. The message is not so much that the master has become the slave, but that all are on the SAME LEVEL. This is a very significant nuance. After Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, He challenges them to do the same for each other and to see that all are equal friends in the kingdom; nobody is above or below in any way. And further along in this same discourse, Jesus will spell it out: "You are my friends....I no longer speak of you as slaves, for a slave does not know what His master is about. Instead, I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father.....The command I give you is this, that you love one another." (Jn 15:14-17) (adapted from James Martin, *JESUS: A PILGRIMAGE*, p. 347-348)

Second, in his autobiography, *ANGELA'S ASHES*, Frank McCourt tells of a confession he once made as a young boy in Limerick, Ireland. His mother had just given birth and their in-laws from the North had sent five pounds to buy milk for the new baby. But his father, an alcoholic, had taken the money and was drinking it away in the pub. His mother had sent him, a young boy, to find his dad and bring him home. But young Frankie can't find his father. What he finds instead is a drunken sailor in a pub, asleep, with a largely untouched plate of fish and chips in front of him. Ravenously hungry, Frankie takes the fish and chips outside and eats them. Then, feeling guilty for stealing, he decides he had better go to confession. It's Saturday afternoon and he goes to the church and confesses to a priest that he stole fish and chips from a drunken man. The priest asks him why he did this and Frankie answers that he was hungry, that there is not a scrap of

food in their house, and that his mother is raging by the fire because his father is drinking away the money meant to buy milk for the new baby. The priest, hearing all this, suddenly becomes quiet. Instead of scolding Frankie and giving him a penance, he does something else. In McCourt's words: "I wonder if the priest is asleep because he's very quiet til he says, 'My child, I sit here, I hear the sins of the poor, I assign a penance. I bestow an absolution. I should be on my knees washing their feet.... Go. Pray for me.' He blesses me in Latin, talks to himself in English and I wonder what I did to him."

These words wonderfully describe one of the central meanings of the Eucharist. We should be on our knees washing each others' feet because that is precisely what Jesus did at the first Eucharist and He did it to teach us that the Eucharist is not our own private act of devotion meant to square our debts with God, but a call to grace -- and a grace for service. The Eucharist is meant to send us out into the world ready to give expression to Christ's hospitality, humility, and self-effacement. It is not our private snack between Jesus and me.

This idea lies at the very heart of the Eucharist itself. Jesus tells us this with the words: "Receive, give thanks, break, and share." The Eucharist invites us to receive nourishment from God, fill with gratitude, and, on the basis of that, to break open our lives and serve the poor in hospitality, humility, and self-donation. This is everywhere evident in the Gospels, though John's Gospel puts it the most clearly. Where the other gospels have Jesus speaking the words of institution at the Last Supper ("This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in memory of me,") John has Jesus act out the meaning of the Eucharist. Too often as Catholics we have stopped our understanding with simply the Real Presence in the Body and Blood, a core teaching surely. But it is missing an equally core reality. We have often thought that multiplying the number of times we 'do this,' meaning come to Mass and receive the Eucharist, that we will automatically be made holy. Well, we've all known crabby priests who have 'done this' multiple times for years -- and crabby parishioners -- and they do not seem to have turned out to be very holy! No, the Eucharist has to be lived out. And it has to be lived out there in the world we live in day in and day out. John has Jesus washing the disciples' feet. But for John, this gesture replaces the words of institution. It specifies what the Eucharist is in fact meant to do, namely, to lead us out of church and into the humble service of others. And, as is typically Catholic theology -- it's not one or the other -- it's BOTH -- we celebrate this -- the Eucharistic sacrifice and real presence in here-- and we wash feet in humble service of others out there.

The Eucharist calls us to move from worship to service, to take the nourishment, the embrace, the kiss, we have just received from God and this community, and translate it immediately and directly into loving service of others. To take the Eucharist seriously is to begin to wash the feet of others, especially the feet of the poor. That is why this one day of the year -- when we remember the institution of the Eucharist, the Church specifies that the collection is entirely for the poor, not the support of the clergy or the church buildings.

The Eucharist is both an invitation which invites us and a grace which empowers us to service. And what it invites us to do is to replace distrust with hospitality, pride with humility, and self-interest with self-effacement so as to reverse the world's order of things -- wherein the rich get served by the poor and where the first priority is always to keep our pride intact and our self-interest protected. The Eucharist invites us to step down from pride, away from self-interest, to turn the mantle of privilege into the apron of service, so as to help reverse the world's order of things wherein pride, status, and self-interest are forever the straws that stir the drink.

It is no accident that, among all the potential scriptural texts it might have picked for liturgy on Holy Thursday, the feast that marks the institution of the Eucharist, the church has chosen to use John's account of

Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. A splendid choice. Indeed, nothing better expresses the meaning of the Eucharist than does this gesture. May we do as Jesus has done. Amen. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 2/24/2018)

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