

## HOLY THURSDAY

Although we usually refer to today's feast as Holy Thursday, it is also quite commonly called Maundy Thursday. It was many years before I was curious enough to find out where that word "Maundy" comes from. As you may well know, it's an old English corruption of the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning "commandment," referring to Jesus' new commandment to his disciples to love one another as he loved them, a love symbolized by his washing their feet at the Last Supper. Used as a noun, "maundy" actually means this ceremony of foot washing. Before reflecting on what it can mean for us today, I want to say something about the way in which this rite developed over the course of the centuries. I hope you will find this short history both interesting and informative.

To start with Scripture, if you consider carefully what Jesus says in today's Gospel to explain *why* he washed the disciples' feet, he actually gives two reasons. First, in his dialogue with Peter, he says that it is a means of sanctification, a way of becoming more closely united to him, for he tells Peter: "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me" (Jn 13:8). This reason led some of the early Christian churches, especially in Milan, to make foot washing an integral part of the baptismal ritual, the sacrament whereby one first becomes united to Christ in his Church. St. Ambrose, the great fourth-century bishop of that city, called the washing of the feet of those being baptized "a mystery and a sanctification," without which one could have no part in Jesus.

This understanding of foot washing did not, however, gain widespread acceptance within the Church, leaving the field open for the second reason that Jesus gives in our Gospel passage, namely, its being an example of humble service that his disciples are to follow. We Benedictines are especially familiar with this reason, for St. Benedict mentions the practice twice in his Rule. In his chapter on the reception of guests, he says that after the community greets and prays with those who have come seeking hospitality, "the abbot shall pour water on the hands of the guests, and the abbot with the entire community shall wash their feet" (RB 53:13). This service of foot washing was also regularly extended

to the members of the monastic community, for in his chapter on the weekly kitchen servers St. Benedict says that the one who is ending his weekly service and the one just beginning it are together "to wash the feet of everyone" (RB 35:9). This practice definitely caught on. In some monasteries the ceremony of washing the feet of guests was practiced almost every day, while in others it was done only weekly or during certain seasons. At the abbey of St. Martin in Marmoutier, there were occasionally as many as 300 persons who would have their feet washed at one time. In the medieval monasteries, it was especially poor guests who received this service, which therefore came to be called the *Mandatum Pauperum*, the washing of the feet of the poor. In the Middle Ages, bishops would practice something similar in their dioceses, in particular on Holy Thursday, the day that most directly recalls Jesus doing this for his disciples at the Last Supper.

Historians of ecclesiastical music have studied the chants that regularly accompanied the foot washing, and as you might expect the one that was usually sung first was the following: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you, says the Lord." Similar antiphons followed, such as "Let us love one another, for love is from God. The one who loves his brother is born of God, and lives in him," or again, "Where there is charity and love, there is the gathering of the saints." Clearly the texts of these chants were chosen to exhort the congregation to practice humble service in imitation of Jesus and to serve as a means of fostering love and unity among themselves. Similar chants were (and still are) found in the Eastern Church, including this beautiful antiphon: "United by the bond of love and offering themselves to Christ the Lord, the apostles were washed clean, and with feet made beautiful, they preached to all the Gospel of peace."<sup>1</sup>

There was, however, for centuries no uniformity throughout the Western Church concerning this rite. All that changed with the liturgical reform of Pope Pius XII in 1956, when the foot washing was specified as part of the revised Holy Week services. No longer was there any emphasis on washing the feet of the poor, apparently because it was felt that this unduly singled out that particular group and

exposed them to some embarrassment. The rubrics simply said that twelve men should be chosen from the congregation and led into the sanctuary, where the presiding priest would wash their feet. The number twelve was obviously chosen to represent the number of the apostles at the Last Supper, while the priest would similarly be representing Christ. The reformed rite thereby became a symbolic liturgical drama, and one with considerable potential for emphasizing better than mere words the importance of humble service to others.

However, like almost any liturgical ceremony, there is a potential downside to this kind of drama, in which the one presiding at the service is the only one doing the washing. One historical theologian puts the danger this way: "The notion of making a fine display of one's humility can be attractive to some people.... The washing of the feet ritual where 'the leader' does it to others who are somehow 'less' than him can all too easily be subverted into [a kind of] game. But this becomes impossible if each member of the community has to both wash feet and have feet washed--now it becomes a radical statement of equality. Each and every person is to be a servant of the others, and it is the mutuality of service that lets each discover both the challenge of being a disciple and the dignity of being in Christ."<sup>2</sup> This practice of mutual foot washing is actually practiced in some small communities descending from the Radical Reformation, such as Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Moravians. From what I have read, the totality of the experience--including personal discomfort, the practical messiness of a damp floor, and thoughtful reflection in hindsight--can be positively transformative for those on the path of discipleship. I am definitely not advocating mutual foot washing here, where the numbers are too large and the space too small, but even our more modest "symbolic liturgical drama" can have a positive effect on everyone present if all of us are really mindful of what is being symbolized, what the Vatican's Congregation of Divine Worship speaks of as the call "to be generous in the works of Christian charity."

If we are to be truly generous in this way, I think we must first admit that there is a "messiness" involved that is far more profound than that of the damp floor that might result from mutual foot washing. There are always going to be far more calls on our love and compassion than can actually be met, and at times this could become so mind-numbing as to lead us to do nothing because we can't possibly do everything. Those who have traveled in especially poverty-stricken parts of the world will have had the experience of giving some money to one child asking help and immediately being besieged by a dozen others who seemingly came out of nowhere asking for similar help. Even in our own city, which may have fewer destitute people than Calcutta or Dhaka, there are thousands who are homeless, some of them this very night sleeping on the ground under expressway bridges or else facing eviction from an apartment that is barely livable in the first place. Happily, there are those who work on what we can call "the front lines" to meet these challenges. One good example is SOME (So Others Might Eat), founded by Fr. Horace McKenna in 1970 primarily to provide nutritional meals for the needy and subsequently expanding to include a medical clinic, a job-training program, and an affordable housing program. Another such group is Christ House, one of their facilities located here in D.C., another in northern Virginia. All such groups maintain websites with detailed information about the kinds of work volunteers can provide. It could well be that someone listening to this homily has enough time to volunteer his or her services for at least some hours each week. There could scarcely be a more specific or practical way of taking on Christ's *mandatum* to love others as he loved us. And for those who for any reason cannot volunteer their services, at the very least we can all support this kind of work by generous donations of money or clothing. It is so very striking how much St. Paul in some of his letters emphasized the importance of his various communities supporting the needs of the church at Jerusalem with their donations. May all of us take to heart the similar opportunities before us, opportunities to do exactly what Jesus commands and commends in the final sentence of today's Gospel: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

1" These antiphons are all taken from Peter Jeffrey, "Mandatum Novum Do Vobis: Toward a Renewal of the Holy Thursday Footwashing Rite," *Worship* 64 (1990): 121-23.

2" Thomas O'Loughlin, "From a Damp Floor to a New Vision of Church: Footwashing as a Challenge to Liturgy and Discipleship," *Worship* 88 (2014): 143.