

## *The Sacramentum of Incarnation Activity*

Holy Thursday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019

In a couple of minutes time we will enact the foot washing of the Twelve. But before we come to this re-enactment I want to think with you about the significance of what we will witness. Father Terry and I will remove our chasubles and will then stoop down to wash the feet of the men and women who have come forward. These people represent the body of Christ, the community of the faithful. Why will we do this? As priests we are acting in the person of Christ. We will represent what St. John says at the beginning of the passage from John 13.

***<sup>1</sup> Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.***

St John says that he loved his own to the end. He wants us to understand that this action of Jesus is an action that encapsulates his whole ministry. The early Church Fathers referred to this action as a *sacramentum*. By this word *sacramentum* they did not mean any one sacrament but the action is an expression of the entire mystery of Christ. This is the place to where the incarnation leads; to a stooping down and washing the feet of those who are his own. In so doing St. John says that Jesus loved them to the end. Therefore when Fr Terry and I will re-enact this foot washing see in what we are doing an expression of love that is at the heart of what it means to say in Jesus "God is with us."

By taking the towel something very significant is being stated. Just before this is described in chapter 13, St John tells us that the devil had entered into Judas. What does the devil want to do? His name means "the one who divides"... Diaboleen. . Judas will act in such a way that will bring division. We will read that after Jesus arrest, coordinated by Judas, all the disciples forsook the Lord and fled.

Jesus on the other hand enacts a work that expresses true humility. He so humbles himself so as to show that the way of the counter attack to diabolic activity is incarnational activity. Diabolical activity always wants to exert control and power thus leading to division. Incarnational activity is always in the service of the other thus leading to forgiveness and unity.

This is why the early Church Fathers called this a *sacramentum*. This action shows how Jesus divested himself of heavenly glory and chose to be a man who stoops to wash the feet of those he truly loved to the end.

John 13 recounts an exchange between Jesus and Peter that helps us to understand what this foot washing means. Peter clearly does not want to have his feet washed by Jesus. This goes against his understanding of the relationship between master and disciple and against his image of the Messiah, whom he recognizes in Jesus. His resistance to the foot-washing has ultimately the same meaning as his protest against Jesus' prophecy of the Passion after the great confession at Caesarea Philippi: "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" was how he put it on that occasion (Mt 16:22).

Now, from a similar standpoint, he says: “You shall never wash my feet” (Jn 13:8). It is the response to Jesus that we find throughout history: You are the victor, you are the strong one—you must not lower yourself or practice humility! Again and again Jesus has to help us recognize anew that God’s power is different, that the Messiah must pass through suffering into glory and must lead others along the same path.

For remember that this *sacramentum* is the way of incarnational love and is the foil to diabolical activity. But why do the apostles need their feet washed? Is this because they had dirty feet and Jesus was only wanting to show them an act of loving service. It means much more than this.

Because the apostle’s and we live in the world, we are influenced by the world, which in John’s Gospel is under the dominion of the Devil. We will hear in the St John Passion Reading tomorrow how pervasive the influence of evil is and how it infects all of the Apostles, and Peter in a particular way, as his denial will clearly illustrate. Therefore because the Apostles and we walk our way through the world we need to be cleansed from its evil influence. The foot washing is St. John’s way of showing us how this cleansing happens.

There is this enigmatic sentence in the exchange between Peter and Jesus. Peter having acknowledged his need for cleansing then goes to the extreme and says “Lord wash my hands and my head too!” To which Jesus responds:

***He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean, but not every one of you.”***

In the early Church the complete bath was a reference to Baptism, by which person is immersed into Christ once and for all, acquiring his new identity as one who dwells in Christ. This fundamental event, by which we become Christians, not through our own doing but through the action of the Lord in his Church, cannot be repeated. Yet in the life of Christians—for table fellowship with the Lord in the Eucharist it constantly requires completion: “washing of feet”. What is this? Pope Benedict XVI responded to this question in the following way:

*It seems to me that the First Letter of John points us in the right direction and shows us what is meant. There we read: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins **and cleanse us from all unrighteousness**. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1:8–10). Since even the baptized remain sinners, they need confession of sins, “which cleanses us from all unrighteousness”.*

This word “cleanse” signals the inner connection with the foot-washing passage. Indeed in one of the earliest writings of the post apostolic period called the Teaching of the Twelve we read:

***“In church, make confession of your faults” (4, 14) and again, “Assemble on the Lord’s day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults” (14, 1).***

The point is this: guilt must not be allowed to fester in the silence of the soul, poisoning it from within because of the diabolical climate that so pervades the world. It needs to be confessed. Through confession, we bring it into the light, we place it within Christ's purifying love (cf. Jn 3:20–21). In confession, the Lord washes our soiled feet over and over again and prepares us for table fellowship with him.

Why is this so important? It is because of what table fellowship means. Jesus said in John 6: "For whoever eats my bread and drinks my blood has eternal life." The Eucharist, as the eternal presence of God, eternalizes those who consume Him, making us ready for eternity where there will be no diabolical activity but only incarnational activity. We participate in Jesus Christ through this sacrament of the Eucharist. And Jesus said we can only really participate in this sacrament, that is have a part of him, if we also allow him to wash our feet, that is cleanse our souls through the Sacrament of Confession.

Jesus whole life was the *Sacramentum par excellence* and shows us that he has left us especially the gift of the sacraments of Baptism, Confession and the Eucharist so we can share in his life. The re-enactment of the foot washing shows us we are to make use of Jesus' last action shown to the Twelve so that we too can wash each other's feet through this act of loving to the end, in the Sacrament of Confession.