

Footwashing as a sacrament

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Unpacking John 13¹

At first glance it would seem that there would be no difficulty about the meaning of the scene with which John opens the account of the Last Supper. Verses 14 to 17 state explicitly that what Jesus did in washing the feet of his disciples was an example of self-sacrificing humility to be imitated by them. Mennonites and other Christians have made footwashing a significant part of their liturgical life. Other groups have made it an occasional custom, for example, as part of the Holy Thursday liturgy.

Saint Benedict includes footwashing as part of Chapter 53 in the Rule, on receiving guests. In addition, the kitchen servers are to wash the feet of the community on Saturday, as they enter and leave their service – RB chapter 35. I mention this only because it is monastic communities who kept the practice of footwashing alive in the Church. It disappeared completely from the Roman liturgy until the renewed liturgy in the late 1960s.

However, it is scripture scholar Raymond Brown's view that "the majority of Christians, from the very beginning, have felt that what Jesus was commanding in verses 14 to 17 was an imitation of the *spirit* of footwashing (emphasis added). And so even where footwashing has been part of the liturgy, it has generally been understood as a sacramental rather than as a sacrament, understood, that is, as a sacred rite of lesser importance."² It is this view that I wish to challenge here today, at least conceptually. I believe that footwashing is a sacrament – that as a rite, it can stand shoulder to shoulder with the other sacraments.

In humbling himself to "wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus is prefiguring his humiliation and death, even as Mary acted out beforehand the anointing of his body for burial."³ (John 12.1-8) The footwashing is an action of service for others, symbolic of the service he will render in laying down his life for others."⁴ That is why Jesus can claim that the footwashing is necessary if the disciples are to share in his heritage and will render his disciples clean. The disciples would not understand the symbolism until the resurrection.

¹ In the section I rely heavily on Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), pp. 558-559.

² Brown, p. 558.

³ See R. Alan Culpepper in "The Johannine *Hypodeigma*: A Reading of John 13" *Semeia* 1991 Vol. 52, p. 139.

⁴ Brown, p. 162.

Footwashing as a sacrament⁵

I may risk making you angry by calling footwashing a sacrament. After all, some of you may be saying, “Who do you think you are? We already have seven sacraments and that is quite enough, thank you!”

Does footwashing have the gravitas of a sacrament? In Catholic terms, “sacraments are ‘powers that come forth’ from the Body of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body. They are the ‘the masterworks of God’ at work in the new and everlasting covenant.”⁶

As a classical definition put it, “the sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ, by which divine life is shared with us. The visible rites, in time and space, are fruitful and make present the graces of each sacrament.”

Eucharist as multi-layered in meaning

When we think about Eucharist as a sacrament, we note immediately that it is layered in meaning. Eucharist is about nourishment, food for the journey; it is about the laying down of self as a sacrifice with its ultimate point of reference in the cross of Jesus; it is transformation of the gathered community into the Body of Christ. (Father Godfrey Diekmann’s frequently quoted line: if the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, and we are left unchanged, who cares?). It makes possible reconciliation between those who are estranged; it makes central the forgiveness of sins – (“this is my blood, for the forgiveness of sins”) it has an eschatology – it is a foretaste of the table of the Lamb.

Some exegesis and some history

Many commentators on John 13 are satisfied *with the symbolism of humble service that is in the narrative* and see no other meaning. And yet there are difficulties.

Versus 6 to 10 indicate that what Jesus has done in the footwashing is essential if the disciples are “to be part of him” and apparently this action cleanses them of sin. Something more than an example of humble service seems to be involved. Moreover, there is a lack of harmony in the narrative. For example, v. 7 states that understanding will only come afterwards, seemingly after the resurrection. But verses 12 and 17 imply that understanding is possible now, as it should have been if only an example of humble service were involved.

These difficulties have led scholars to seek other symbolism in footwashing in addition to humility. Origen, in the 3rd century, related footwashing to preparation for preaching the

⁵ Thomas O’Loughlin, *Washing Feet: Imitating the Example of Jesus in the Liturgy Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015). See O’Loughlin’s helpful comments on p. 51.

⁶ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), #1116 on p. 289.

gospel.⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, famed scripture scholar, sees the action as symbolizing the purification of the disciples through the word of Jesus.⁸

Other scholars have explored the sacramental possibilities of the symbolism. The use of water naturally suggests baptism and there is patristic support for this interpretation.⁹ Some pose the question: Did some strands of the Johannine community use footwashing as a baptismal rite?¹⁰ Does footwashing take away original sin, as Ambrose of Milan argued?¹¹ John's Gospel doesn't have the account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan – was footwashing the rite of entry?

Other writers see footwashing as a Johannine counterpart to Eucharist because in John the footwashing replaces the Synoptic account of Jesus taking, breaking, blessing and giving blessed bread and wine to his disciples.

Others see the forgiveness of sins in footwashing. Led by Augustine, Latin writers from the fourth century on and contemporary Roman Catholic writers have seen a reference to penance in verse 10: "... has no need to wash, except for his feet," for Penance cleanses sins committed after the baptismal washing.¹²

Finally, some scholars even see footwashing is a type of apostolic ordination.¹³ The only sacrament no one seems to find in footwashing is marriage!!

Incarnational, sacramental worldview

The Catholic understanding of sacrament is rooted in the incarnation, in the Word made flesh. By taking on flesh in our time, Jesus Christ affirms in a fundamental way, that the created,

⁷ Brown, p. 558.

⁸ Brown, p. 558.

⁹ Peter Jeffrey in "Mandatum Novum Do Vobis: Toward a Renewal of the Holy Thursday Footwashing Rite," in *Worship*, Vol. 64, 1990, pp. 112-114 for a treatment of the practice of Ambrose of Milan.

¹⁰ See Martin F. Connell, "Nisi Pedes, Except for the Feet: Footwashing in the Community of John's Gospel" in *Worship*, Vol. 70, 1996, pp. 517-531.

¹¹ See Mark Galli in "Washing Souls by Washing Feet," in *Christian History* 1993, #37. "Most early Christians practiced baptism by immersion, but a minority took their cues from John 13:10: they believed baptism by the washing of feet precluded the need to wash head and hands. This view began in Syria and spread west by the late 100s. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (in modern France) conjectured that Jesus, during his descent into hell, purified the dead by baptizing them by washing their feet.

Not everyone agreed on foot washing's sacramental value. By the early 300s, the rite was so controversial, one important church council outlawed it. At the end of the fourth century, though, Ambrose, bishop of Milan, defended footwashing's baptismal significance: while full baptism purified someone from personal sins, he argued, foot washing purified the neophyte from *original* sin."

¹² Brown, p. 559.

¹³ Brown, p. 559.

material world is holy, is part of the story of redemption. The material world is not God, is not Creator, but created. The created world mediates our union with the Triune God.

Out of this understanding comes a fundamental principle of Catholic liturgy: everything and the kitchen sink have a place within liturgy.¹⁴ Why? Because everything is potentially sacred. Everything is graced. So everything is fair game for liturgy. So we sing, dance, parade, wave banners, ring bells, play organs, blow horns, sound trumpets – and sometimes we are still and silent. We eat, drink, bathe one another in water, pour oil on one another, put one another to bed when we get married and into the earth when we die. We burn incense, hang paintings, put up mosaics, erect statues, construct extraordinary buildings and illumine them through stained glass. We appeal to sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Historically, the principle on which the liturgy operated was, “If it works, throw it in.” The reason for such inclusiveness is the deep Catholic conviction and intuition that nothing is by definition profane. Everything is potentially sacramental.

Furthermore, over the centuries Catholics have developed rituals and ritual books around seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Ordination, and Marriage. We have a lectionary that lays out the readings from Scripture, a three-year cycle for Sundays, a two-year cycle for weekdays. There are seasons: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time. There is a cycle of saints’ feasts that spans the year.

Not only that, but over the centuries a complex sacramental theology has been developed, to accommodate new insights and fresh meanings for sacramental action. The Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council were watershed events that have shaped ensuing practice and theology in significant ways.

Significance of this passage in the Book of Glory

This scene of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is fundamental to the meaning of John’s Gospel. This passage from chapter thirteen is the beginning of the Book of Glory, the entrée into the final teaching of Jesus, and is followed by his cross and resurrection. Thus, this scene of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples orients everything that follows. It functions in much the same manner as Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves in John 6, or the healing of the man born blind in John 9: the perfectly chosen sign, followed by reflection and interpretation.

Footwashing and the work of the cross

By washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus is rejecting a power differential between himself and his disciples. Later Jesus will say to his disciples, “I no longer call you slaves, but I call you

¹⁴ This section is heavily dependent on Michael Himes, “Finding God in All Things,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, edited by Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), p. 99.

friends.” Service between friends is service between equals. The good of the other is truly primary. When service is given between friends, no account statement is kept, there is no credit or debit. There is simply rejoicing.

That is why Jesus says, “No greater love can a person have, than to lay down his or her life for a friend.” Jesus lays down his life out an act of true friendship, the deepest love one can have. This is the love, the passionate commitment of Christ, the gift of self, that we celebrate every time we wash feet.

“We sometimes forget in the joy of the resurrection, that on the Cross, Christ dies in bad company. He is co-crucified among criminals, tormented, rejected, expelled, eclipsed, expunged, erased, crossed out and double-crossed, sacrificed, reduced to a ‘less than human’ icon of pain and derision. And yes, this ruined, ravished humanity of ours belongs to the very divinity of a God whose name is *kenosis*. In this emptying, Jesus empties himself of anything that would smack of success, power, or control by our standards.

Footwashing and humble service

One of the skills that makes Saint Benedict a great teacher is his ability to distill a message into a memorable sound bite. For example, “Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God.” (RB 43) “All guests are to be welcomed as Christ.” (RB 53) Or “The brothers should serve one another.” (RB 35) Chapter 35 of the Rule of Benedict is focused on the kitchen servers of the week: “The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business of the monastery. For such service increases reward and fosters love. Let those are not strong have help so they will serve without distress...Let all the rest serve one another in love.”¹⁵

Saint Benedict, like the evangelist John, is concerned about building a community that is based on mutual love and respect. We all know how easy it is for love to remain paper thin, an idea that has no working substance. Mutual service is a direct expression of love in action (hear Dostoyevsky) and it strengthens the bond of love.

In families and communities, there are bound to be differences of opinion on just about everything. Mutual service is the glue that holds the community or the family together. We may not agree on everything, but we care enough about one another to serve each other.

In families and communities, there may be a perception that there is a pecking order. Why does he always get his way? Why do I always get stuck with this job? Mutual service can take the edge off these differences.

¹⁵ See Terrence G. Kardong’s *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) for excellent, detailed information on the Rule of Benedict.

This service is made real in a number of different ways: by coming together to pray; in preparing and serving the daily food; in caring for guests; in scrubbing and cleaning and fixing; in attending to the needs of the poor and especially the sick; in keeping a careful eye on the growth and development of the young; in respecting and helping the elderly. Mutual service is a way to lighten the load, to make it all manageable.

By washing the feet of his disciples, by giving of his very life for his disciples and to us on the cross, Jesus, the Lamb of God, is telling us something of fundamental importance about his entire ministry: “The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10.45)

Footwashing, forgiveness, and reconciliation

The washing of the feet is equivalent to offering forgiveness. In the time of Jesus, streets had their share of human and animal refuse. Feet were dirty and smelly and washing them was the task of slaves or the lowest level servants. Jesus doing this for his disciples is wildly inappropriate. In biblical times, hands and feet symbolize human activity. To wash someone’s hands or feet is to wash away their offenses. Hence, the words of psalm 51: “O Lord, wash me more and more from my guilt, cleanse me from my sins.”

So when Jesus tells his disciples, “If I who am teacher and Lord, have washed your feet (forgiven you) then you must do likewise for each other (forgive each other). We remember Jesus as taking, breaking, giving bread and wine. The handing over of food and drink became an embodied symbol of that other handing over, the “handing over” when Christ, betrayed into the hands of sinners, surrenders his body to death on the cross. In footwashing we pledge to use our hands and feet for the work of forgiveness, for the work of repairing broken or damaged relationships. I remember Father Kilian McDonnell, one of our monks who has spent his life of teaching and scholarship working for unity between Christians, saying that ecumenical dialogue begins with us on our knees. In doing so, we are asking for forgiveness for harm done, looking into each other’s eyes, respecting and affirming the dignity of each other, knowing that there are differences. We pledge to wash each other's feet, to hand over our lives for each other, for the sake of the world.

A new paradigm of leadership¹⁶

With respect to greatness and service, Jesus teaches his disciples, “The greatest among you must serve the rest.” In a stinging critique of the Pharisees Jesus says, “Do what they say, not what they do. They seek the places of honor in the synagogues, they lay heavy burdens on others, and do not lift a finger to help carry them.”

¹⁶ Robert Greenleaf is the foremost exponent of “The Servant as Leader,” an essay that was originally published in 1970. (Westfield, IN: the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1991), pp. 1-37.

Or “You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.” (Mark 10.42-44) “Do not lord it over each other, as the Gentiles do.”

Jesus embodies this teaching out to the full throughout his ministry. In washing the feet of his disciples he finds a perfect teaching moment, not with words, but with a simple action. John’s description is matter-of-fact. Paralleling Eucharistic language of taking, breaking, blessing, and sharing, Jesus removes his outer garment, takes a towel and wraps it around his waist. Then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash their feet. I believe that the evangelist John is showing us that he thinks of footwashing as Eucharist.

The Word made flesh, who spoke the universe into being – this one is not clinging to divinity, but he has found the perfect parabolic action. He is doing the work of a slave, a *doulos*. Jesus nourishes his disciples with loving service. He washes their feet as the only begotten Son, as teacher, as master, as their Lord, who has come into the world to redeem it.

Footwashing and eschatology

Footwashing as a sacrament points us to a future of a community of servants, in communion with each other and the Risen Christ. The action of kneeling down and washing another’s feet forcefully reminds us of Jesus doing the same for his disciples on the night before he emptied himself completely on the cross. The story does not end there but Jesus is raised and ascends to the Father. It is a pathway that each one of us wishes to follow.

Footwashing points us toward the ultimate victory of Easter over all those events that have put us on our knees – hardships of every kind, loss at all different points in our lives, the seeming unintelligibility of violence, greed, war, hatred, vengeance, and our seeming inability to find peace on this earth. Footwashing has a giving and a receiving, a mutual service that reminds us of true friendships of good marriages, the genuine bonds that are part of living in community, and that time when God will bring to completion and perfection. In the vision of Isaiah 2, there will be no more war or training for war. Swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. All will come together to worship the true and living God.

Conclusion

As I prepared this for you, I admit it was unnerving. I worried about derailing this retreat. I believe that as a Church we should continue to explore the significance of footwashing in the Christian tradition. We should do this through studying, storytelling, and imaginative practice, and developing a rite that is richly liturgical and inclusive. We should treat footwashing not as second best, but rather as having the theological and liturgical richness to be a sacrament, and giving fundamental expression to the meaning of the Reign of God and the salvific work of Jesus Christ.