

HOLY THURSDAY 2013

When I was a seminary student over at Catholic University some years ago, one of my Scripture professors was a gentle Hungarian, Fr. Joseph Zalotay, who died in 1998. Perhaps to save time correcting exam books at the end of a course, his final exam was always oral, and one of the questions he asked a lot of us was why the Fourth Gospel, unlike the other three, has no account of the institution of the Eucharist, nothing about Jesus saying, “Take and eat; this is my body,” and “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.” You might think that the correct answer is that this would have been superfluous because we already have in the sixth chapter of that gospel the great Bread of Life Discourse, where Jesus proclaims: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” “Not bad,” Professor Zalotay might have said, but not the best response. He had taught us that the real reason for the absence of an institution narrative is that its place was taken by what we just heard in the reading of the gospel, the account of Jesus’ washing of the feet of his disciples. How so? Well, this act of humble service shows us in a graphic way what for any of us is the real effect of the sacrament, what the scholastic theologians called the *res tantum*, namely, our more intense and committed incorporation into the body of all those who make up what we call “the Church.” Another way of saying this is that reception of “*Holy Communion*” fosters, nourishes, and deepens our “*daily communion*” with one another in love and service.

To be sure, the gesture of washing others’ feet may no longer be nearly as relevant as it would have been many centuries ago. Nowadays we normally wear shoes and socks, keeping our feet reasonably clean. I even dare say that at least some of the twelve persons who will participate in our own ceremony of the *mandatum* a few minutes from now probably made sure

to wash their feet in advance lest they appear dirty during the rite. Back in first-century Palestine, however, when there were no asphalt roads or concrete sidewalks and when most people wore only sandals on their feet, that part of the body tended to get especially dirty. In many households, it would have been the servants, or even the slaves, who performed this service when the owner or invited guests arrived at the door. This was still the case in St. Benedict's day in sixth-century Italy, for the chapter of his Rule dealing with the reception of guests includes these verses: "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' ... Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love.... The abbot shall pour water on the hands of the guests, and the abbot and the entire community shall wash their feet. After the washing they will recite this verse: 'O God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple.'" (RB 53.1,3,12-14).

If we today perform the same act only in a ritual setting, it should nevertheless impress upon our minds the need to take very seriously the words with which Jesus concluded our gospel reading: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." What this means in a practical sense is that each one of us should decide how to perform acts of service that would be more appropriate in our own time. We might take a cue from what Pope Francis did in Rome this very day, when he celebrated the Mass of the Lord's Supper not in the basilica of St. John Lateran but in the Casal del Marmo juvenile detention center. His message to these young offenders was not only that they be assured that there are people in the world who care about them. In addition, as the prison chaplain Fr. Gaetano Greco said, the pope's visit was meant to "make them see that their lives are not bound by a mistake, that forgiveness exists and that they can begin to build their lives again." Is it not possible that some

of us present here today might do something to give hope to persons in our own area who are confined in a prison or detention center?

Or again, and as you would guess anyway, many of the young people whose feet Pope Francis washed come from broken families and had sought an escape from their painful home situation in drugs or alcohol. Is it not possible that some of us present here today could help young persons who may not yet have come into direct conflict with the law but who are definitely “at risk”? It may be someone struggling in school, on the verge of giving up because a passing grade seems unattainable but who could begin doing better with the help of a tutor.

Here’s still another possibility, a recollection from my childhood: Although my father was not ultra-pious, he was definitely involved in the life of our parish. Of all the activities he engaged in there, I well remember his saying one evening at supper that the most satisfying of them all was his involvement in the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which involved regularly bringing food to families in need. This statement has stuck with me, mainly because it illustrates so clearly that genuine Christian love is not a matter of words or feelings, but of deeds. As Jesus said, not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom, but only those who *do* the will of the Father.

If you are wondering how one could get started along these lines, one way is to make use of the Internet, which can be an instrument of much good as well as of tremendous harm. If you simply enter the phrase “Archdiocese of Washington volunteering” in Google or some other search engine, you will immediately be directed to a website called “Volunteer Opportunities: Archdiocese of Washington.” In this way, you could find a very thorough list of all sorts of ways in which you could actually put into practice Jesus’ command that we follow the model he has

given us. Some of the listed opportunities are the following: direct help to the poor and vulnerable; life issues and unplanned pregnancy; prison outreach; health care; legal help; adult literacy; and legislative advocacy. This would allow you to click on the area most in accord with your own experience and interest. I only ask you to forgive me if I have deprived you of the excuse that you'd like to volunteer at something but don't know how to get started.

As we now continue this Mass of the Lord's Supper, we'll have those who will participate in the *mandatum* come into the choir area, and later, when all of the congregation come forward to receive Communion, may we be mindful of what has always been the *res tantum*, the real effect of this sacrament: our mutual growth in love and service.