

The Foot Washing on Holy Thursday: new rubric, renewed paradigm

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Washing the feet of disciples as a way of representing the love and attitude of mutual service that Jesus wanted to animate his community has always been problematic: just look at the reaction of Peter in the gospel (Jn 13:8) and reflect on the fact that this is one of the few times Jesus gives a direct 'do this' (Jn 13:14) to the disciples, it had all but disappeared from Christian practice within decades. It was one thing to say one loved a fellow Christian (who happened to be one's slave), quite another to actually serve him or her by washing their feet! Enough is enough!

So strange is the practice that when Pope Francis went to a prison in Rome on 28 March 2013, Holy Thursday, and washed the feet of men and women it was a news story. Alas, for many Catholics the story was not so much about how this was a sign of the divine mercy the Church must manifest to the world but that the Bishop of Rome was the feet of men *and women*. Within hours there was a quasi-official statement that this was 'not a liturgical' foot washing—one wonders what 'liturgy' means in this case—but simply a gesture and therefore it should not be interpreted as a change in the rubrics for the official foot washing in the Mass of the Last Supper which was interpreted as implying that only male feet were to be washed.¹ The 'problem' had arisen in the 1990s in the US where a group of rubrical literalists reacted to the natural development of the liturgy for Holy Thursday—many parishes took a representative sample of people for the group whose feet were washed at the Eucharist—and said that '*viri*' in the rubric meant males and only males could take part. Some canonists pointed out that this was not how law was to be interpreted,² but the game was afoot. Whether women could be included on Holy Thursday became one of the bones of contention in the liturgical culture war—and it was, and is, a favorite topic on websites of the 'cannot be too Catholic' variety. There were four sad consequences of this. First, many bishops weighed in and declared the rubric sacrosanct without recognizing that rubrical evolution is a constant in living liturgy that seeks to speak to ordinary people. Second, faced with controversy in their parishes, many pastors simply dropped the whole event (and it was not that widespread to start with)—so the whole teaching-by-doing that was at the heart of Jesus's action was lost! Third, where it was done it became a token

¹ See P. Rumsey, 'Women have feet too . . .', *The Pastoral Review* 9,5(2013)51-4.

² See J.M. Huels, *More Disputed Questions in the Liturgy* (Chicago 1996), 25-7.

affair—and this sends out the signal that liturgy is a sham.³ And, lastly, sent another signal to many women that the Church was a male institution for men.

The New Rubric

From the letter Pope Francis sent to Cardinal Sarah on 20 December last, it is clear that the pope had hoped that his example over three years would be sufficient for all other pastors to appreciate that this was an important sign of the unlimited love and mercy to all that we preach—and so that the restrictive interpretation would be consigned to the past.⁴

However, the continuing quest for rubrical ‘purity’ at the expense of the intended sign that Jesus wished to give in the Upper Room has now led him to ask the Congregation to change, formally, the rubrics—and in addition give guidance on how the new rubric is to be interpreted. The decree (*In Missa in Cena Domini*) was published on 21 January and it makes two points directly.⁵

First, the rubric changes from ‘the men who have been chosen . . .’ to ‘those chosen from the People of God . . .’. So now women are permitted.

Second, less this be interpreted as implying you can have women—but you could just carry on not having them (i.e. a restrictive interpretation of a permission)—there is also an explicit statement on what ‘*ex populo Dei*’ means in this case. The group chosen for the footwashing should ‘represent the variety and unity of each portion of the People of God. It should be made up of men and women, and if it can be done of a mix of young people and old people, of healthy people and sick people, of clergy, those in the consecrated life, and lay people.’ In other words: the whole range of the baptized should be seen to be involved.

In many parishes this will not be news—they have been doing this for decades—but for some priests it will come as liberation. They have wanted to do this, but felt compelled to follow the rubric when so many in authority were insistent upon it. They no longer need to feel this stress. There will be other, or course, for whom this is one more break with ‘tradition’ and they will no doubt seek to implement it in as minimal a fashion as possible. This minimal engagement with liturgical reform is often given a high-sounding name as ‘the hermeneutic of continuity’—and it is significant that the clarifying comment in the decree pointing out how ‘from the People of God’ should be interpreted can be seen as a rejection of this so-called ‘hermeneutic of continuity.’ We might all remember that in an historical religions, such as ours, there is always the danger that we forget that the encounter with the divine is not a trip into the past. Our liturgy is not a drama of some ideal past moment, such as the Last Supper, but an event that takes place now and looks

³Look at the devastating critique by Adrian Howells, ‘Foot Washing for the Sole,’ *Performance Research* 17(2012)128-41 (free on the internet).

⁴On the Vatican website.

⁵On the Vatican website—I could only find it in Latin and Italian (accessed 24 January).

forward. Therefore, tradition, as Picasso once remarked, is having a baby, not wearing your grandfather's hat!

The Renewed Paradigm

Jesus said that he wanted his action to be a 'paradigm' (Jn 13:15 which uses *paradigma*) for the relationships of love and service that should characterize the relationships between his followers.⁶ This is something that both the pope's letter and the decree emphasize. The decree sees Christ's action as a vivid portrayal (*quasi scaenice demonstrandam*) of his humility and love towards the disciples—which we then imitate towards one another. It cites Mt 20:28 that Jesus came to serve rather than be served, that his action was one of brotherly love, unlimited (referencing Jn 13:1), for the salvation of all humanity. Indeed, it is because his love is to the whole human race that men, women, old, young, ill and well, and every other variation should be represented. These are themes that the pope had already mentioned in his letter: there are no limits in the divine love and this is what the People of God must appreciate and then seek to express towards one another and the world. In short, the footwashing on Holy Thursday evening should be the model, the paradigm, the pattern, the shining example - *paradigma*, chosen by the evangelist to be placed in the voice of Jesus, is a very strong and embracing word in Greek - for how we act towards one another both within the church and as the church within the larger society.

We should note that this view of the footwashing contains within it a different view of this liturgy, and liturgy more widely, than the way this action has been interpreted down the years.⁷ The accepted interpretation of this liturgical action for a very long time was that it was intended as a modeling of the relationship of the clergy, in this case the parish priest, to the flock. It was a reminder, in an age when clergy were seen as social superiors and part of the governing class—the *ordo*—that they should be servants and not masters to the rest of the baptized. This was, and indeed is, a valuable lesson, but it sees the footwashing too narrowly from a clerical perspective. Footwashing is not that the master should be seen as a servant—which easily degenerates into simply twisting language so that power hides under a veneer of 'ministry'—but that everyone in the community should relate with care and service to everyone else.

'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet' (Jn 13:14).

We are all responsible for one another. We must all be servants of one another. We must all love one another as sisters and brothers. Footwashing catches the kernel of gospel morality.

The other common interpretation of this ritual is that it is part of acting out the Last Supper on Holy Thursday. We see this interpretation when the reason given for why women were

⁶ See T. O'Loughlin, 'From a Damp Floor to a New Vision of Church: Footwashing as a Challenge to Liturgy and Discipleship,' *Worship* 88(2014)137-50.

⁷ See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Washing of Feet: The Interplay of Praxis and Theology,' *Anaphora* 7(2013)37-46.

excludes from the ritual was that Jesus did it only to the apostles (assumed to be males)—so we have to make it look like ‘back then.’ This is also seen in some places where the presider removes his chasuble and girds himself with a towel imagining that he is imitating Jesus in Jn 13:4. This is a very powerful image and a common view of liturgy in general: so the footwashing at Easter is akin to the nativity play at Christmas! This view ignores the fact that Jesus deliberately set out to wash their feet so that there could be no doubt about how they, in their turn, should behave towards one another. It was not simple a once off that could be acted out in nostalgia of that night: it was an agenda to be embedded in actual future practice.

In pointing to the significance of footwashing among the People of God and in their service to humanity, this decree is showing up the inadequacy of such ways of viewing both this action and the whole liturgy. Liturgy is not play acting, nor is it a tableaux performance of what happened ‘back then’ long ago in Jerusalem, but it is the activity of a People committed to a different vision of human relationship seeking, with God’s help, to begin creating the Kingdom where they are on Holy Thursday evening.⁸

When we engage in footwashing we are not only fulfilling a gospel command, we are learning in our bodies, in our knees, our hands and our feet, as well as in our minds that we have received love and mercy from God, we must be loving and merciful towards each other, and our actions (not just our words) must show this mercy to all. We all know this (in our heads) and profess it (in words) but when we have to ‘operationalize’ it with water in a basin and confront its awkwardness and feeling of embarrassment and humiliation—then the gospel really bites. We have absorbed something with our whole humanity not just given it notional assent. I love this remark made to me by someone who just had experienced footwashing for the first time, and was clearly shocked by the experience: ‘Jesus had a point in setting this up!’

Further Reading

T. O’Loughlin, *Washing Feet: Imitating the Example of Jesus in the Liturgy Today*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2015.

⁸See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Celebrating the New Commandment: Foot-washing and our Theology of Liturgy,’ *Scripture in Church* 43/169(2013)18-27.