

Holy Thursday, Foot Washing, and the Institution of the Priesthood

Interpreting Scripture for its moral import alone, while common and understandable, can cause us to miss the deeper meaning of Christ's actions

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In many Catholic parishes on Holy Thursday, a foot washing ritual is incorporated into Mass. Although optional, most parishes choose to do it, for it is a most powerful symbol in the present day, just

as it is a powerful symbol at its Scriptural roots in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, when Jesus himself washes his disciples' feet.

But a symbol of what? The most obvious answer is that the foot washing ritual is a symbol of humble service, given the extreme indignity involved in washing feet in the ancient world, a task usually reserved for the lowest slave of the house. Indeed, Jesus' own explicit words seem to present it as such: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn. 13:14-15).

However, some see the foot washing ritual not as a symbol of service but a symbol of exclusion serving to reinforce patriarchy, for when done according to the Church's rubrics, only the feet of males are to be washed. The question, then, concerns why the rubrics for the ritual command that *virii selecti*—"chosen males"—have their feet washed, and not women.

Basis for Holy Orders

The answer is that the foot washing scene in the Gospel of John is not only meant to be an example of humble service, but primarily a record of the institution of the Christian priesthood and thus the Scriptural root of the sacrament of holy orders.

Interpreting Scripture for its moral import is the default approach for most novice readers and many professional interpreters of Scripture, as it's the easiest way to read the Bible and seems to make the Bible relevant. Many readers ask what a particular passage might mean regarding how they are to live in the present. So, when encountering important figures

in the Bible, the first instinct of many is to ask: How am I like Herod? Abraham? Mary? How should I emulate the good guys? How should I imitate Christ? What would Jesus do?

Reading the Gospels this way can reduce the disciples to positive examples or (more often, given the honest portrayal of their failings) negative foils. What is often overlooked is that the apostles are a special class unto themselves. They are not just disciples like all Christians are disciples; they are unique. Jesus chooses twelve of them for a reason, to suggest that the Church they will lead will continue the redemptive work of Israel's twelve tribes in the world. In Catholic (and Orthodox) understanding, the disciples are the first priests and bishops, and thus what Jesus says to them and does with them may not be of direct exemplary relevance for all Christians. For instance, when Jesus gives Peter alone the keys to the kingdom in Matthew 16, it does not mean that every Christian has the keys to the kingdom and the power to bind and loose.

Something more than mere exemplarism is going on in John 13. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet has sacerdotal significance; Jesus institutes the priesthood. In John 13:3-8 we read:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "Unless (*ean mē*) I do not wash you, you have no part in me."

Jesus' reply to Peter, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand", suggests that more is going on than just a moral example, for the ritual can only be understood "afterward." After what? His glorification, as made clear in [John 13:1-2](#), as well as beforehand in John 12:16: "At first the disciples did not understand these things; but when Jesus had been glorified, then they recalled that it was precisely these things that had been written about him and these things they had done to him."

Fr. Jerome Neyrey, SJ, longtime professor of New Testament at

Notre Dame, [demonstrated](#) that the footwashing scene in John 13 is a “status transformation ritual” in which the disciples are made priests of the new covenant. Peter at first refuses to let Jesus wash his feet, but Jesus’ response that Peter can have no “part” in Jesus (Jn. 13:8b) unless Peter submits to the ritual reveals its gravity and indicates that sacerdotal sharing in Christ is involved. Important is the observation that the phrase *ean mē* (“unless”) indicates real transformation elsewhere in the Gospel of John:

Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (3:3)
Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (3:5)
Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. (6:53)
Unless you believe that ‘I AM,’ you will die in your sins. (8:24)
Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. (12:24)
Unless I wash you, you have no part in me. (13:8)
As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (15:4)

In John 13 we find evidence that real ontological transformation is in view. But transformation into what? Into priests, as in John 13 we also find parallels to Leviticus 16, which concerns the priestly Day of Atonement ritual:

Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting, and shall put off the linen garments which he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there; and he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his garments, and come forth, and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people. (Lev. 16:23-24)

Observe the pattern: The high priest undresses, bathes, dresses, and offers sacrifice. It’s the same pattern found in John 13: Jesus undresses (v. 4), washes the disciples’ feet (v. 5-11), dresses (v. 12), and will soon offer himself in sacrifice. Whereas in Leviticus the high priest washes all of himself, in John, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. Jesus is sharing his high priesthood with the disciples; he must wash them—that is, ordain them as priests—lest they have “no part” in his own priesthood.

Indeed, washing is part of priestly ordination elsewhere in the Old Testament. In the midst of the “consecration” of Aaron and his sons, Moses “washed them with water” (Lev. 8:6-10). We also see Aaron and his sons being washed in Exodus 40:

Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the door of the tent of meeting, and shall wash them with water. (v. 12) [...] And he set the laver between the tent of

meeting and the altar, and put water in it for washing, with which Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet; when they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed; as the LORD commanded Moses. (Ex. 40:30-32)

Furthermore, the mention of having a “part” (*meros*) in John 13:8 recalls the priestly Levites having their portion (*meris*) in the LORD (Num. 18:20 and Deut. 10:9, LXX).

In short, in John 13 we have the disciples receiving a new status, the status of priests, as made clear by the substantial parallels to passages about priesthood in the Old Testament. If modern men and women wonder why Catholics have an all-male priesthood that wears vestments and offers the sacrifice of the Eucharist in churches that resemble temples, it’s because the Old Testament had an all-male priesthood that wears vestments and offers sacrifices in the tabernacle and



temples.

Christ's Countercultural Teaching

Since, therefore, in Catholic thinking, Jesus’ ritual washing the disciples’ feet on Holy Thursday is the institution of priestly ordination, and since in Catholic tradition priests are males, [the footwashing ritual in the liturgy for Holy Thursday is restricted to males, *virii selecti*](#). This teaching about the ordination of men only is difficult for some in our radically egalitarian age, but it is authoritative. In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II wrote:

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.

The reasons given in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* come directly from a 1975 letter of Pope Paul VI to Dr. F. D. Coggan, then Archbishop of Canterbury:

She [the Church] holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church.

In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, John Paul also quotes an address of Paul VI from 1977: "The real reason is that, in giving the Church her fundamental constitution, her theological anthropology—thereafter always followed by the Church's Tradition—Christ established things in this way." (For further reading, see Sr. Sara Butler's [The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church.](#))

This is a countercultural teaching today. Indeed, Jesus' ordination of males alone as priests was countercultural in the ancient world as well, since the ancient pagan world was well acquainted with priestesses. John Paul writes in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that the document (Declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" (October 15, 1976: AAS 69 [1977], 98-116, p. 100) from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "shows clearly that Christ's way of acting did not proceed from sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time." Indeed, Joseph Ratzinger also [observed this historical fact](#):

To many, this demand for the ordination of women, this possibility of having Catholic priestesses, appears not only justified but obvious: a simple and inevitable adaptation of the Church to a new social situation that has come into being.

In reality this kind of "emancipation" of woman is in no way new. One forgets that in the ancient world all the religions also had priestesses. All except one: the Jewish. Christianity, here too following the "scandalous" original example of Jesus, opens a new situation to women; it accords them a position that represents a novelty with respect to Judaism. But of the latter he preserves the exclusively male priesthood. Evidently, Christian intuition understood that the question was not secondary, that to defend Scripture (which in neither the Old nor the New Testament knows women priests) signified once more to defend the human person, especially those of the female sex.

The teaching is clear and historic. How, then, should Catholics present it?

Ignoring or downplaying the issue isn't much of a strategy, as doing so would involve missing an opportunity to teach upon

one of the most misunderstood but crucial aspects of Catholic faith—the priesthood and, more broadly, Catholic ecclesiology. Indeed, the idea of a visible Church with a given structure willed by Christ and bringing Christ himself into the world cuts directly against contemporary [Moral Therapeutic Deism](#), the *de facto* spirituality of most Americans.

It is true that much of what Catholicism has to say is perceived as a resounding "No!" But any "no" is a reflex of saying "yes" to something good, true, and beautiful about God, man, and nature, whether a matter of reason or revelation. If the world perceives a "no," it's because the world's loves are so very disordered that it says "yes" to darkness and death, seeking the water of life without knowing it's ingesting a counterfeit poison instead. Thus, Catholics would do well to present teaching about the priesthood positively, to present the priesthood as the great gift that it is, that institution which serves us by bringing us the risen Christ in the sacraments.

It's also important to point out that talk of the Catholic "hierarchy" is ultimately inadequate. For exercising one's ministry as a priest or a bishop isn't a matter of raw power, as if a priest or bishop were merely a prince or potentate. No, serving as a priest or bishop involves serving after the manner of Jesus Christ who "emptied himself and took on the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:7), the same Christ who taught his first priests and bishops, the Twelve, that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mk. 10:43-44), the same Christ who in washing the disciples' feet as an "example" to them directly linked priestly and episcopal service with humility.

There is, then, no real tension between reading John 13 as a story concerning the example of serving one another in humility and love and reading it as the institution of the priesthood.



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