

One evening, several years ago, I attended a dinner at which the featured speaker was John Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York. In his prepared remarks, he told a remarkable and inspiring story. Looking out the window of his second story apartment late one night, he spotted a man lying face down on the pavement below. The man was motionless. The Cardinal knew that he must act swiftly. Some thoughts crossed his mind: "Is the man asleep? Has he been mugged? Is he on drugs? Is he mentally ill? Is he setting me up?"

On impulse, he made the decision to come to his aid. Upon reaching the man who was unresponsive, he knelt down, covered him in a blanket and then prayed over him. As he got up to return to his apartment, he heard a voice, the voice of the man he had assisted, who spoke up. He said, "I have a name". He was no longer anonymous. He had a face and a name.

One of the Popes of the twentieth century, John XXIII once said, "Man is never so great as when he is kneeling"

In today's gospel, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. He kneels before them and carries out the duty of a slave. In the washing of the feet we catch a glimpse of what Jesus does and what he is. He, the Lord, stoops to our level. He lays aside his royal garments and becomes a slave, standing at the door and performing the lowest task of the world. Not even Jewish slaves were commanded to wash the feet of others. It was considered too demeaning, too loathsome. Ordinary people did not wear shoes. Houses did not have toilets. Human and animal waste filled the streets and footpaths and people prayed for rain to clean them of this foul refuse. Jesus washes our dirty feet so that we may be admitted to Christ's banquet. In this action, the entire mystery of Jesus' person is made clear. He kneels in front of each man, woman and child to wash their feet because every person is dear to God. Recall the hymn in Paul's Letter to the Philippians: "Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God, something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

Peter voices his objection. "You will never wash my feet". His concept of God involved an image of majesty, of divine greatness. Surely we can sympathize with

the apostle. The same resistance is perhaps in each one of us. What would we say if Jesus appeared before us and started to wash our dirty dishes and clean our toilets. Peter had to learn that the greatness of God is different from our idea of greatness. It consists in the humility of service. "The Son of Man has come, not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for the many"

Jesus said, "If I therefore, be master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash another's feet". What does it actually mean? Every good deed is a service of the washing of feet. In particular, it includes the suffering, the despised, the broken and wounded, the poor and the enemy in our society.

A story may help to illustrate Our Lord's teaching. Once, while at Dana-Farber Hospital in Boston for my annual check-up, my hematologist, Dr. Robert Soiffer, Head of hematology at Harvard University and one of the world's most prominent physicians, performed an unexpected act of humility. My sister accidentally spilled a cup of coffee in one of the rooms the doctor routinely uses to see his patients. The doctor insisted on cleaning up the mess himself. He dropped to his knees and wiped the floor. We both protested. I said, "My sister is responsible. Let her be the one to clean it up". He refused. He said, "I don't mind". My sister and I were stunned.

God kneels. What is truly amazing is that God kneels. He kneels down before the whole world. The mystery of the greatness of God is seen precisely in the fact that he can be small. He doesn't have to take the highest place or the box seats.

The opening words of today's gospel describe the motive which leads Jesus to wash the feet of his disciples and to lay down his life for them:

"Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father.. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1).

His death expresses the shear depth of his love and this love is now dramatically symbolized in the foot washing.

Jesus gave us the gifts of the Eucharist and the Holy Priesthood on the night of the Last Supper. The mystery of the cross is anticipated. Jesus speaks of his life poured out and his body broken. He also commanded, "Do this in memory of Me".

"I have given you a model to follow, so that I have done for you, you should also do" (Jn. 13:5).