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The washing of the feet and the meaning of touch

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Apr. 21, 2011 NCR Today

One thing that religious give up is the sense of touch and being touched. Sure, we hug when we greet family and friends, and we buss with the best, but unless we go for regular massages for a medical reason, we give up the pleasure of being touched.

When I stayed with my sister last year for vacation, she took me with her for a pedicure. She is a regular there and the ladies, all Vietnamese immigrants, greeted us warmly. We removed our sandals. I climbed into the throne-like seat and when the water was warm, the attendant invited me to put my feet in the water. The water was shooting at my feet and swirling.

Several minutes later, the pedicurist took my right foot and began to massage it with oil or lotion. She placed it back in the water and took my left foot.

I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

She dried each foot with care using a very soft white towel and then she trimmed my nails and sanded the calluses from the bottom of my feet.

I wonder what the apostles felt when Jesus washed their tired, dusty feet. I imagine those who were married had been long from the embrace of their spouses as they journeyed on foot with Jesus. Peter resisted because it was a lowly task to wash the feet of another, and he thought he should be washing Jesus? feet.

Several years ago I was at a Maronite parish for Holy Thursday and the priest washed the feet of men, young and old, and three boys who could not stop laughing. I think they were embarrassed, but they made me laugh, too.

Two nights ago a sister of my community went to the parish where she sings in the choir. They had invited her to have her feet washed during the mass on Holy Thursday, and they wanted to have a dry run, literally. She is happy to be included.

Earlier this week **I reflected on feeling comfort from the Cross for the first time** [1]. Today I am thinking of the first Eucharist, yes, but also the washing of the feet and what it means for the body and soul, the whole person.

Jesus probably didn?t rush through the washing for pastoral reasons. He who loved the disciples must have taken the time to truly wash their calloused, tired, perhaps neglected feet that had been everywhere, and perhaps unwashed for more than a day, taking each foot into his hands, and gently washing it and drying it before moving on.

Perhaps he anointed their feet as well. It was Jesus? way of showing them that they, too, must carry out this humble, comforting, and refreshing task for others, in order to approach the Cross.

In the documentary ?The Saint of 9/11: The True Story of Father Mychal Judge [2],? there is a part where he talks about ministering to men dying of HIV/AIDS in the hospital. Many were angry at God and wanted nothing to do with the Franciscan priest.

But as he spoke with them, he would start to massage their feet, and this would calm them. In those first years of the pandemic, few people were willing touch a person with HIV/AIDS. I can only imagine what Fr. Judge?s care might have meant to them who were treated as pariahs and outcasts.

It was the comfort of a loving God shown through the ministry of a priest.

My sister paid for the pedicures and I know she added a generous tip for the ladies. I felt wonderful and I think I heard my feet laughing for the sheer joy of it.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/feeling-comfort-cross-first-time
[2] http://www.amazon.com/Saint-11-Story-Father-Mychal/dp/B000ION2IU