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Pope Francis & the Washing of Feet

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 1, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Last Thursday, I called attention to a comment [1]by a young priest at one of the blogs for traditionalist Catholics. The young priest wrote he was bewildered by Pope Francis? washing the feet of women as well as men during the Mandatum rite at the prison for young offenders where the pope celebrated the Mass of the Lord?s Supper. I noted that the priest?s comment was sad, but the tone of my post was snarky. I apologize for that. The issue here is quite serious and deserves better than snark.

There are really two issues at play here that warrant attention. The first is the power of symbols and the second the training of some young priests.

Among the great things about being Catholic and not Protestant is the emphasis we put on the symbols of our faith as opposed to merely focusing on the Word of God in the Bible. A symbol invites multiple meanings, not divergent meanings necessarily, but multiple meanings ? though, of course, so do certain Scripture passages and I delight, too, in the fact that our Catholic tradition permits multiple interpretations of the texts. A symbol, especially the rich symbolism we find in our liturgy during the Triduum, conveys the idea that we are wrestling with a Mystery. In the washing of the feet, we see Jesus entering into a parable, teaching his disciples by example what it means to be the greatest by becoming the least, inverting the normal understandings of power and deference, making service the measure of greatness and linking the acceptance of grace to the purification of one?s life. All this could be written about or spoken of, but Jesus simply did it.

What was most sad about the young priest?s comment was that he seemed incapable of grasping all this because the pope had dared to wash the feet of women and, for this young priest, the rite involved apostles, only men were apostles, the rubrics indicate that only the feet of men should be washed, and so the pope was doing something very bad. Of course, the significance of rubrics is always a topic of debate and there are priests on both the left and the right who depart from the rubrics who shouldn?t, introducing vulgarizations into the liturgy. But, the rubric, like all Church rules, including canon law, is designed to serve the good of souls and so requires a pastor to apply the rubric or rule or law in a given situation. When the rules become so important that we miss their aim, we create the greatest vulgarization of all, reducing our worship to a kind of ideological statement, and a statement we make, not a listening to whatever statement God is trying to make.

So, yes, the pope washed the feet of twelve young prisoners including the feet of two women and two Muslims. I think it should be beyond obvious that Francis? actions allowed God to speak to us, that is, if we have ears to hear. Vatican Radio collected some letters [2]that were sent to the Pope by young prisoners in Los Angeles. Take a moment and read them. They are heart-rending. They are evidence that the pope succeeded in conveying an aspect of the Mandatum rite that had not been highlighted before, at least not by a pope. His action helped these young prisoners, thousands of miles away, feel closer to God, his action gave them some hope, his action let them know that while the world has rejected them, God has not. If anyone fails to see this because of their distress that the pope washed the feet of women, well, I reiterate my concern without the snark: There is something wrong, and it is not with the pope.

I titled my post ?Who Ordained This Guy?? It is a fair question. I have long been worried that for all the

visitations, all the progress on formation, some of our seminaries are breeding grounds of a kind of clericalism that impedes the Gospel. I recall a priest who has taught seminarians for many years telling me last year that it used to be enough to start with the Scripture, but that in recent years, he has needed to get his students? attention by starting his lectures with a papal utterance. That is alarming. I recall reading an interview in a newspaper in which a seminary rector said that there were no gay students in his seminary, and I wondered how out of touch he was. (A priest friend, familiar with the rector and the seminary, posed a different question of the rector: ?I would like to see his dance card??) The formation of our clergy is important and no one should be able to skate through by being the first in the chapel and the last to leave, or by ever increasing vows of fealty to the memory of Pope John Paul II. These ?John Paul II? priests may have been drawn to the priesthood by the inspiration of the pope from Poland, and he was certainly an inspiring figure in many ways. But, he lived his life and these young priests want to live his life too instead of living their own. That is what frightens. There is an immaturity at work here, not least an intellectual immaturity, that is inappropriate for the clergy.

This immaturity has found its way into the episcopacy as well. It must be said: Ever since Cardinal Raymond Burke joined the Congregation for Bishops, the quality of episcopal appointments in the United States has suffered and it is difficult not to perceive his influence on those appointments. Culture Warriors are in, pastors not so much. The more intransigent one is, the better one?s chances of advancement. A deep commitment to the traditional Latin Mass has been put on the ?plus? side of the ledger when it should provoke questions: Why is this person fascinated with an antique liturgy which, whatever its beauty, is hardly a pastoral plan for the twenty-first century? Why all the ?dress-up,? including scandalously expensive cappa magnas that are in no way intrinsic to the rite? Is their something authentic here or is this affection for the old Mass an affectation, and evidence of a desire to escape the present moment? Does this fascination with rubrics suggest a desire for certainty that is more characteristic of fundamentalism than Catholicism? There is no necessary congruence between a desire to wear lace and an excessively clericalist interpretation of Canon 915, yet the two do seem to go together, so why is that?

I will conclude by linking to an essay published by David Clouthier [3], a theologian at Mt. St. Mary?s, at CatholicMoralTheology.com. Clouthier is one of the young theologians who participates in the Catholic Conversation Project which I have been happy to attend the past two years, and his essay hits all the right notes, including a thoughtful recognition of the way the Holy Thursday Mass does serve to instruct the Church about the ministerial priesthood. Clouthier writes: ?For too long in the Catholic Church, we have been stuck in a place where Jesus? mission has been used as the occasion for exaggerated misunderstandings, from the shocked reactions of traditionalists to the painful broadside of Gary Wills against the ministerial priesthood altogether. I am increasingly hopeful that Francis is a unique man, whose words and gestures are meant to draw us beyond these misunderstandings.? I hope so too.

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