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The foot washing ritual for Holy Thursday's liturgy has taken on many shapes and forms since Vatican II. How well I remember training six altar boys to haul 12 chairs, mechanically and ceremoniously, to the sanctuary immediately following the homily of Holy Thursday.

At a signal from the associate pastor, 12 men would move from their pews, process to the sanctuary wearing suits and ties, and be seated up there in front of everyone as the pastor and his retinue of trained altar boys busied themselves as they gave each member of the parish board or council a modest foot (as in only one) wash.

As the practice became more pervasive, someone from the parish office was assigned the unpleasant task of rounding up 12 willing men — or was it 11, due to Judas? Not an easy task, as people seemed less-than-anxious to expose their feet. Then we began to ask for volunteers. As enthusiasm waned, the practice degenerated into hand- or foot washing stations around the front of the church. This most important feast of Holy Thursday, usually not well attended anyway, suffered further from the lack of willing apostles.

Struggling with the loss of a meaningful expression of the mandatum, I took some pains to re-examine the act of the ritual itself with our worship committees at a number of parishes. We looked at stilted, scripted rehearsals, and at the actual rite of washing.

First of all, we determined that the environment needed a shift in emphasis. Upon entering the worship space, the assembly should notice not grapes and loaves of bread, but the foot washing instruments. Artisans crafted worthy and beautiful pieces of art for our churches in the form of vases, pitchers, basins, towels and tables to hold them.

The humble and simple act of washing became the focus of the ritual, instead of the activity of arranging chairs, with predetermined volunteers processing up to the sanctuary. In our foot washing liturgies now, we have a sort of "rolling admissions" style of procession. The presider begins by washing and kissing the feet of someone,

anyone.

The one washed joins in the procession and washes the next person's feet. That person takes up the towels and leads to the next person to be washed.

The procession gets larger as each one washed takes up a new task: the pitcher, the basin, clean towels, dirty towels, removing water when the basin overflows, etc.

As the procession swells, all encircle each newly chosen disciple for washing. The presider now becomes the overseer: "As I have done, so you must do." The choir leads song after song; this will take whatever time it takes.

The procession circumambulates in and out of pews, front and back — the young, the old, the handicapped, men and women — until it is over. Though this ritual act, in this one grand and magnificent gesture, the assembled learn how to serve, how to lead, how to process (a useful skill for the transfer of the Eucharist at the end of the Holy Thursday Mass!).

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The presider decides when the time has come to conclude the washing, drawing all the participants up to the front step of the sanctuary, where all make a deep and reverent bow to the altar. The materials are all set aside.

Our parishioners have not only witnessed an evolution in this ritual; they have experienced a conversion through active participation. And like pilgrim people, they have learned to "walk the talk." This experience may sound new, challenging, and a great departure from your past practice. So is the new translation of the Roman Missal. Time and time again, once they experience it, the assembly has resoundingly responded: "Then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well!"

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the April 2011 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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