

Holy Thursday, April 13, 2017

Have you ever heard of a silent homily or sermon, that is one without words? The Buddha, it is reported, brought his disciples to enlightenment with his silent “flower sermon,” simply by holding up to them a beautiful flower. According to tradition, Saint Francis of Assisi instructed his comrades to preach the Gospel, but added, use words if necessary. He was stressing the importance of charitable service.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the first Holy Thursday evening, while celebrating the Passover Supper with his apostles, also gave them a similar silent message by washing their feet. This act of hospitality was provided because of the hot and dirty unpaved footpaths of the time. It was a menial task done by household servants or slaves.

When Jesus begins to wash the apostles’ feet, apparently demeaning himself, Peter objects. Jesus persists and tells Peter: “unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” The Lord goes on to tell Peter and the other apostles: “if I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.”

In the early Christian times, foot washing was practiced regularly at Church liturgies and often in conjunction with baptism. It survives only on Holy Thursday when bishops and priests, especially the Holy Father, Pope Francis, do it to follow the example of Jesus.

Are we, the present day disciples of Jesus, to take him literally in regularly washing each other’s feet? I believe we should take the Lord seriously although not literally. The message Jesus gives is that we should extend ourselves to serve each other’s legitimate needs, to mutually serve one another in his name.

To implement Jesus' wordless homily may mean for families to pray with one another and for one another both at home and at Church. It may mean that spouses make quality time for each other, to be more mutually supportive, to be more patient, understanding, and forgiving. It may mean for parents to become more engaged with their children in guiding them to maturity in all areas, including their religious formation. It may mean for children to listen, respect, and obey parents, and to assume responsibility for the upkeep of the household, not just for their rooms!

To implement Jesus' wordless homily, priests and religious leaders need to listen with more concern to the needs and aspirations of parishioners. It may mean for parishioners to become more active in the work of the parish.

Jesus' act of washing the feet of his apostles comes immediately before his passion and crucifixion, which is an even more powerful homily. Both events serve to teach us that Our Lord Jesus Christ has come to give himself totally for our eternal benefit. As we gratefully accept his acts of love for us, may we give and share with each other the message of his powerful wordless homilies.