

You may or may not have heard that Pope Francis changed the Church law regarding the foot washing ritual on Holy Thursday. Before this year, the law stated that the priest was to wash the feet of twelve “men”. The reason was clear, in imitation of the washing of the feet of the 12 Apostles by Jesus – the 12 who were, of course, all men, and who were to be made the first priests – actually the first bishops of the Church. So the Holy Thursday Mass is, in part, a celebration of the institution by Jesus of the Holy Priesthood.

However, in the washing of the feet of the 12 Apostles by Jesus, the Church has also always seen this action as a call to all of Jesus’ followers to be true servants of one another in imitation of Jesus Himself, and so to emphasize this aspect of Jesus’ action, Pope Francis has changed the law concerning the foot washing so that it can now be include both men and women. Again, this is a sign of the call of Jesus for all of us to imitate the action of Jesus in being servants to one another.

Jesus’ example, of course, culminates in His going to the cross, which is the ultimate act of servitude, taking all our sins upon Himself and allowing Himself to be nailed to the cross.

When we see Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and especially as we see Jesus nailed to the cross, we see the full truth of what Jesus’ earthly life means: “My life is for you.”

Everything about Jesus’ life bespeaks this to us: “My life is for you.” No one else has loved us so completely and on this Holy Thursday night we also commemorate Jesus’ gift that embodies and makes present the fullness of Jesus’ complete gift of Himself on the cross – the gift of the Holy Eucharist

“This is my body – which will be given up for you...

This is the chalice of my blood... which will be poured out for you.”

No one else has loved us so completely.

Turning then to ourselves, we think again of what Jesus said to the disciples and to us, “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” This is not just about the foot washing – it is also about the cross. This is the self-gift to which all of us as followers of Jesus are called, that our life speaks to others those words: “My life is for you.”

Mother Teresa expressed it this way that we should become like the Eucharist for others – just as Jesus allows Himself to be consumed by us in the Holy Eucharist, we must allow ourselves then to be consumed by others.

There is much to contemplate here if you think of this in terms of your marriage or your family or your work place or to the stranger or to the ones on the margins of society, as Pope Francis constantly reminds us. Our energy, our time, our patience, our convenience, to be consumed by others. This is what it means to imitate Jesus. This is what it means to love. This is how life is brought to the world.

In the Holy Priesthood, priests above all are to reflect with their lives the reality of Christ's complete self-gift to the world, and the celibacy of the priests in the Latin Church especially make this manifest.

I recently read a Catholic blog in which the blogger was lamenting that priestly celibacy is rarely spoken of in homilies or teachings, and apart even from these things it is usually only spoken of in the context of an argument about why the Church should do away with it, since strictly speaking it is not an absolute theological requirement for the priesthood. The blogger is right. It is regrettable that priestly celibacy is not spoken of more. Because of priestly celibacy, when people look at the priest they clearly, and I could even say, automatically, see and understand that the priest's life is for them.

Does a married priest's life also say, "My life is for you"? Of course it can, but the celibacy of priests in the Latin Church makes this most visible and explicit and, dare I say, also facilitates the complete gift of the priest to his flock since the heart and life of a married person is necessarily divided, as Saint Paul tells us.

"My life is for you."

My friends, on this Holy Thursday night, Jesus calls all of us, priests and people, to imitate Him in His complete self-gift for all which He shows us in the washing of the feet and which reaches perfect culmination on the cross.

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on Holy Thursday, 2016.