

At the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, we celebrate three things: First and foremost, the Institution of the Holy Eucharist and, along with it the priesthood. The Eucharist and the priesthood are inseparable: No priests, no Eucharist. A priest without the eucharist is not going to be a very healthy priest. Also intimately connected to the Eucharist, which is Jesus' very own body and blood which he sacrificed for us on Calvary, comes the commandment of fraternal charity. This commandment was demonstrated by Jesus when he washed the disciples' feet. We commemorate Jesus' actions in some places by the washing of the feet during the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

The actual name for this rite is the "mandatum." Mandatum is Latin for commandment; it is also where we get our word mandate. Fraternal charity is a commandment. During his conversation with the disciples at the Last Supper Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you. No greater love has a man than to lay down his life for his friends." Fraternal charity is a commandment. A mandate. A mandatum. Somewhat ironically, this mandatum, the Washing of the Feet, is an optional rite in tonight's Mass and we aren't going to do it but I am going to talk about it.

Fraternal charity, fraternal love. We have a number of very generous souls in our community who are extremely dedicated to serving the poor which is absolutely essential and I want to again thank you for your dedication. Certainly the apostles understood the necessity of serving the poor through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. But...where did tonight's mandatum take place? Out in the streets of Jerusalem? No. It happened during the Last Supper In the Upper Room within the community of the apostles. This is important.

There is a saying: Charity starts at home. How often are we charitable to strangers or customers or clients yet indifferent, rude, and even mean to the people closest to us? Jesus washed the feet of the Apostles and commanded them to do the same for each other. We have to care for the poor wherever we may find them, but we cannot forget to love our brothers and sisters right here in this community.

In a perfect world, the washing of the feet ritual would look a little bit different.

The first part of the rite would remain the same. The priest—representing Jesus—washes the feet of a group of people representing the rest of the parish. That is following a model set by Jesus, but for that model to be complete, something else has to happen. Jesus said: "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.” This is a symbolic action of humility and charity. In order for us to fulfill the mandatum, the commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved us, the foot washing should not stop with the priest and the group of people. Those people should then wash each other’s feet and then turn and wash the feet of another group and that group another group, and so on and so forth. It isn’t practical to do that in this setting, but if it was, I would take this action even further. I would be very specific about who made up the first two groups of people and who was washing whose feet.

The people I would choose for this would represent the different factions within the parish. Men and women would wash each other’s feet. Parents and children (especially teenagers) would wash each other’s feet. Members of the different racial, cultural, and language groups would wash each other’s feet. Latin Mass haters and Latin Mass lovers would wash each other’s feet (I have specific people in mind for this one). Republicans and Democrats would wash each other’s feet, especially during an election year. Jesus said: “For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them...But rather, love your enemies and do good to them...then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High.”

Those groups I just mentioned: hopefully no one would say, “that person is my enemy” but we often do allow differences in values and opinions to separate us from one another. Since the moment I first walked into this parish four years ago—which was an election year at the beginning of the pandemic—I have seen those divisions at work in ugly ways, especially between people who held different political beliefs. Perhaps a good The washing of the feet, while it is a powerful sign, doesn’t go far enough if it is just something we see the priest doing and don’t put into practice ourselves—within the community.

There is one more thing I need to draw your attention to. The institution of the Eucharist and the commandment for fraternal charity both took place at the Last Supper. They are directly connected. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as a sign of love and model for them to follow. He then showed them the deepest meaning of fraternal love by sacrificing his life for all of his friends and leaving behind the means by which he can always be physically present among us in the Eucharist. Fraternal charity—even to the point of laying down our lives for each other— is the appropriate response to the Body and Blood of Jesus which we consume during Holy Communion. Jesus laid down his life in exchange for ours

as a model for us to follow—for us, hopefully our deaths are more symbolic—but we are called to make sacrifices for our enemies as well as for those we love.

Jesus did that for us. Let us go and do likewise.