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## THERE'S MORE TO IT THAN WHAT YOU SEE! - PART I

One of my favorite quotations comes from the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates: “An unreflective life is not worth living.” In making this statement Socrates speaks a truth that our most ancient ancestors were quick to notice: we human persons have a unique ability to reflect upon what we see, hear and experience and notice a deeper reality and meaning to it. This very human trait, indeed a gift from our Creator, enables us to notice things that other creatures cannot. We can see beyond the surface of things and events to their deeper meaning and purpose.

While this trait can help us enjoy life and its mystery more fully, I believe that it serves an even greater purpose and one which our Creator God no doubt had in mind in giving it to us. It is through our ability to reflect, and it might be said *only* through that ability, that we can come to know God. No one has ever seen God so we cannot claim any immediate face-to-face experience of God. But as we “reflect” upon the mystery of life, the movement, power and beauty of creation, and especially on our own experience of life we are drawn to recognize that there is more to reality, more to life than what we see. St. Bonaventure used to refer to this as “finding the footprints of God in your life”. And this truth led St. Ignatius Loyola to urge others to “find God in all things”. This year in our GIFT program we have been studying the sacraments which are so central to our

Catholic faith and identity. We have noticed how the symbols used in the celebration of each sacrament reveal God and God's power at work among us. Most particularly, when we reflect on the experience of the lives we live, we can become aware of the very real and living God really present in our lives, a process that the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton describes as "God uncovering God's self in me".

I would like to suggest in a three part homily for this three part and three day liturgy which we begin this evening that we use this wonderful and mysterious ability of reflection that God has given us to see beyond the simple events and rituals of these three days to the reality that God intends and which our Catholic faith professes because - there is always more here than just what we can see.

#### THERE'S MORE THERE THAN WHAT WE SEE: THE MEAL

There has always been confusion about what this meal that Jesus shared with his apostles on the night before he died actually was. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe it as a Passover meal but John's Gospel notes that it actually happened on the evening *before* Passover. Some scholars claim it was a common yet sacred and formal fraternal meal often shared by friends who came together for the purposes of devotion and charity. In any case they were a group of disciples with their rabbi and it was not uncommon in that day for them to share a meal. And all meals, no matter where, when or how they were eaten, were considered sacred by the Jewish people so an awareness of God was part of this and all meals.

However what we do know is that whatever type of meal it was, Jesus put his own mark on it and thus gave it his own intended meaning. And he did this by intentionally changing two parts of the formal meal ritual.

First of all as we hear in this evening's Gospel, always read at this Mass of the Lord's Supper, that Jesus, being fully aware of what he was doing, got up from the table and washed the feet of his disciples. The apostles would have immediately noticed this change in the ritual, but Peter, the impulsive one who did not have an unspoken thought, said what the others were thinking. "You shouldn't be washing our feet." That was the job of the lowest servant in the household. Peter, in fact, goes so far as to refuse to have Jesus wash his feet. And Jesus is quite direct in responding to Peter: "Unless I wash you, you will have no part of me." The strength and directness of Jesus' response is not lost on Peter and in reaction he asks to be bathed all over if that is the case. But did you notice that Jesus has more to say about this feet washing? After it is done, he tells the apostles that they must follow his example and wash one another's feet. That common gesture was really more than what it seemed to be. Jesus was intentionally doing it to make a point that went far beyond the need to get the dirt of the road off the disciples' feet or beyond any desire to show the customary Jewish hospitality. Jesus meant to teach them something about who he was and how they should live after he had gone. By the fact that he changed the ritual to which they were so accustomed, Jesus was calling their attention to a new meaning of this dramatic gesture. In order to be faithful to Jesus, his disciples were to live lives of loving service of others. The message is clear and the Church continues to reflect on it especially this night. And this message continues to challenge the Church and each of us. As a result of

what Jesus did and said at this meal, there is no way that being a Christian can mean that we are better than anyone else or that we are above anyone else or that we can lord it over anyone else. The gesture of Jesus for the reflective and faithful disciple is therefore more than just a foot washing.

One other point stands out from the Gospel we heard proclaimed tonight. There is noticeably no account of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper in John's Gospel. No breaking bread, no passing of the cup, no words of blessing, no "Do this in memory of me." Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on the Eucharist tells us why. He writes, "In the Eucharist our God has shown love in the extreme, overturning all those criteria of power which too often govern human relations and radically affirms the criteria of service....It is not by chance" the Pope goes on to say, "that the Gospel of John contains no account of the institution of the Eucharist, but instead relates the "washing of feet": *by bending down to wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus explains the meaning of the Eucharist unequivocally.*" For St. John then, the washing of feet means what the Eucharist means. To live without serving is like living without receiving the Eucharist. When we choose to live without either one, we, as Jesus reminded Peter, can have no part of him. That is a strong and important connection for us to reflect upon tonight.

And that brings us to the other part of the Jewish meal ritual that Jesus changed at the Last Supper. In the other three Gospels which contain accounts of the institution of the Eucharist we hear that Jesus intentionally changed the words of blessing from "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the wilderness" to "This is my body...this is my blood."

Just as with the feet washing, we have to believe that the apostles noticed this change of words. As Jews they had heard that former formula many times. But no one asked what he meant. Perhaps it was becoming clear to them by then that Jesus meant exactly what he said and was creating his own memorial ritual that night. This *is* his body and blood. While it was somewhat like the “bread of affliction” that saved their ancestors in the desert long ago and somewhat like the cup of blessing with which they blessed God at all meals, it was so much more than that. In using the copulative verb “is” which indicates that the two elements it joins are equal, Jesus made it clear that this bread and cup were actually his own life that he was giving for them in love and service. And lest they miss the point in each Gospel account Jesus tells them emphatically using the “command” or imperative form of the verb to do these two ritual actions, whenever they want to memorialize him. When they did this, he would be truly present with them. I guess that this is what the Little Black Book meant when it suggested in today’s reflection that we be *in contact* with Jesus rather than merely thinking about him.

The incorporation of these two dramatic and intentional changes at what they would discover was to be the Last Supper they would share with Jesus stuck with those apostles. In fact they passed those two elements on to those who came after them as essential parts of their faith in Jesus and their life together as a faith community: the two actions of Eucharist and humble service of others. That is why we believe that both actions are essential for anyone claiming to be Catholic and Christian. Perhaps one current pastoral leader of the Church in the United States captures it best:

*When the Body of Christ – which is all of us – has spent its week breaking itself open and giving itself away as food for all those who hunger;  
When the Blood of Christ – which is all of us – has spent its week pouring itself out and giving itself as drink for those who thirst –  
Then gathers on Sunday, and in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup we recognize God's presence again.  
That is what names us as a Catholic people.*

But if all you see is someone washing your feet and someone breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine, you would miss the whole meaning of the night and the reality of the palpable presence of God. No wonder God gave us the ability to reflect!