

**Jesus Shows Us Another Way – Part I**  
**Holy Thursday 2009**  
**Fr. Joseph T. Donnelly**  
**Sacred Heart Church, Southbury, CT, U.S.A.**

I am a strong believer in connecting life and faith. I believe it is the only way for our faith to be vibrant, helpful for human living and credible. With that in mind I believe we need to locate our celebration of the Sacred Triduum squarely within the economic and national turmoil in which we find ourselves this year.

And at the core of this experience of economic turmoil is a clear lesson: this situation was caused in large part by greed, which is to say, by sin. It was seen in various scenarios: risky ventures and investments motivated by a desire for more, ponzi schemes structured to take advantage of others, living way beyond our means in an effort to be the best and have the most. All of this is greed and all of it is therefore sin. And so the point is this: we have tried the greed culture and it hasn't worked. Look where it has gotten us. It has undermined our well-being and our economy and it has not given us the satisfaction it promised. It has caused a social and spiritual crisis which will be in vain unless we learn from the experience. This is the reality we are called to face this Holy Week.

Some of you may recall the powerful Stations of the Cross that parishioners acted out during a GIFT program two years ago and which we did again just two weeks ago following one of our Lenten Fish Fries. It presents a meditation on the traditional Stations and then offers a contemporary

situation that parallels the experience of Jesus at each station. At the end of each station and after reflecting on the contemporary situation, the leader prays a prayer that contains the phrase “Jesus shows us another way.” That mantra struck me and as I reflected upon the events that we celebrate in our annual three-day liturgy, it was clear that Jesus in these events shows us another way. I would like to suggest that we take this unique opportunity to consider it not only for our understanding and appreciation of Jesus, but more importantly to help us live our lives as people of faith. And so, the title of this year’s three-part homily for our three-part liturgy is JESUS SHOWS US ANOTHER WAY.

#### JESUS SHOWS US ANOTHER WAY:

##### The Way of Humble Service of Others

Jesus was always surprising his disciples. As well as they believed they were getting to know him, Jesus would regularly do or say something that would take them by surprise and reveal a different dimension of his person, his message and his mission.

Now there is in the human heart a resistance to doing things differently. And this resistance oftentimes shows itself in the cry “But we’ve always done it this way.” That cry and the attitude it betrays has single-handedly prevented the growth of mature Christian faith in many people. That is how it happened on that night that we commemorate here this evening. It had been the familiar custom of their culture for the lowest ranking servant in

the household to wash the feet of the guests as they entered the house. It was a practical gesture, done to wash the dust from their feet after their journey on the dusty roads of Palestine. But it was also an act of hospitality, a virtue which was held as sacred by the people of Jesus' culture.

As the rabbi Jesus and his disciples were getting ready to share their meal, St. John's Gospel notes that Jesus was "fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God". That reminds me that Jesus was very intentional about what he was going to do. This was not an accidental or spontaneous gesture; it was full of meaning for him and, he hoped it would be full of meaning for his disciples because he intentionally called their attention to what he was doing.

Jesus got up, took off his outer garments, took a towel and tied it around his waist, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. Peter, as he so often did, said out loud what the others no doubt were thinking, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" And when Jesus said that this was exactly what he intended to do, Peter blusters that he will not allow Jesus to do it. Jesus then expresses how essential this gesture and its meaning are for his disciples: "Unless I wash you, you will have no part of me." Sounds serious!

Peter's response is also worth our noting. He does not give himself enthusiastically to this ritual. But he seems to respond honestly, "I don't want to do it, but because you want me to do it, I will." That is somewhat like Jesus a little while later in the garden of Gethsemane when he accepts

his Father's call, not because he wants to do so, but because the Father wants it. Both decisions are motivated by sincere love and faith.

After he had finished washing the disciples' feet, including Peter's, Jesus gets very intentional once again and says that he expects them to follow his example of feet washing and do the same for one another. And this is no mealy-mouthed little wish; Jesus puts it in the imperative voice of the verb: "as I have done, you also *should* do." Humble service of others is a non-negotiable for the one who professes to believe in and follow Jesus.

Returning to our contemporary situation, Jesus' example and command shows us another way. Despite our cultural belief that the one who dies with the most toys, the biggest house, the trendiest car, the largest salary, the busiest social life, the kids who play the most sports and the most prestigious job doesn't actually win! Quite the contrary, it is the one who knows who he or she is before God and who humbly serves others who really wins. Albert Schweitzer, the famous humanitarian, theologian, missionary and medical doctor once noted in speaking to a group of young people, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Where would we be today if the cultural greed that has grown up among us and within us, especially in those of us more materially blessed than many of our sisters and brothers had been trumped by the humble service that Jesus showed and commanded his disciples to imitate? What if all the time, energy and resources that went into getting ahead had been directed rather

to giving a hand? Would our nation and our economy be in the fragile state that it is in today if we Christians were more concerned about serving others especially the poor and the vulnerable and less focused on relatively inconsequential matters of blending in with our culture and being successful in the eyes of others?

I do not mean to try to give a simple or naïve solution to the very serious and complex state of our culture, but I do believe that Jesus offers us another way to live that would make us not only happier, but more satisfied, successful and more accurately reflective of who Jesus wants us to be..

As we do each year and as Catholic communities throughout the world will do tonight as well, we are all invited to take part in the ritual of the washing of feet. Sr. Pat, Deacon Joe, Deacon Chuck and I will begin to wash the feet of some of our parishioners at various places in our church. Then we invite any of you to come forward to one of the stations and allow one of us to wash your feet. It can feel a bit awkward, but allow the challenging words of Jesus to Peter to help you to overcome any resistance you discover in yourself to this ritual. This is a way in which we can better understand who Jesus really is and what it actually means to participate in his life and mission.

May this ritual experience help us all better appreciate another way of living that Jesus shows us.

