On Bended Knee
The Eucharist and Service

A Pastoral Letter from
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Throughout the centuries, artists have used their gifts to tell us the story of Christ's life. They have told the story in music, marble, and paint on canvas. These artistic works are familiar, perhaps too familiar. Because they are so familiar we may see them, but fail to get the deeper message. They touch our senses, but not our hearts.

But if we stop and ponder them and seek a new and deeper understanding, with a fresh appreciation, they are astonishing. They proclaim that our God is like no other gods, a God of wondrous surprises. Can this helpless Infant really be Divine? Can this bruised and pitiful figure be God? Only the eyes of faith can see beyond the appearances.

Let us look at another scene from the life of Christ. In many ways it is equally overwhelming and thoroughly unexpected. Even Peter was so perplexed that he protested. But Christ insisted.

In John's Gospel, we see a Christ on bended knee washing the feet of Peter. Washing dusty feet was the work of slaves, not of a Teacher and Lord. "You shall never wash my feet," Peter said. But Christ made it clear that this was not an empty symbol. It was a profound teaching moment. "If I do not wash you" Jesus answered, "You will have no share in my heritage." Peter apparently got the message and said, "Then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well:" Peter's response should be a model for all Christians. We cannot follow Christ half-heartedly. In responding to Christ there should be no halfway measures, no negotiations, and no ifs.

Why did Christ interrupt the Passover meal to do this wondrous deed? Christ and the apostles had already begun the supper. In John's Gospel, the act occurs within the first Eucharist. When Christ returned to the table after washing their feet, He began to teach. He underlined the message. "Do you understand what I just did for you ... If I washed your feet — I who am Teacher and Lord — then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: As I have done, so you must do."
Each time we gather around the Eucharistic table, we commemorate and do what Christ told His apostles to do in memory of Him. We know that Christ gave us the Eucharist so that His living presence would remain with us and within us. We refer to the Eucharist as the bread of angels, pilgrim’s food for the journey. It is all of that and more. Sacred writers have reminded us that when we eat natural food it is transformed into us. The apple becomes us and not vice-versa. But the Eucharist is different. It transforms us so that we might become Christ. We are to become His gentle hands, His feet, His loving and compassionate voice and gaze, His very self. Like Paul we should be able to say that it is not I, but Christ who lives within us. This should enliven us not only to be Christ, but also to do as Christ did.

All of us have had times in our lives when we seemed to be able to identify with the crucified Christ. To be His disciple, we must carry our cross. But we cannot pick and choose how we will imitate Christ. There are times when we must be Christ on bended knee, washing the feet of our brothers and sisters. Eucharist should urge and empower us to do so.

I write these words as we observe the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Diocese of Greensburg. I write them as your shepherd, who through no merits of my own have been called to lead and serve this Church at this moment in its history. It is a pastoral letter, which seeks to give you a shepherd’s care and to share my concerns. It is addressed to all God’s people of the diocese who worship with us and to anyone else who might be kind enough to read these words.

We are a vigorous Church. We have a proud history. Clergy and laity have written beautiful pages of that history, some public and some written only in the book of life. The work of Jesus Christ, done by his followers, has touched every corner of our four counties. I am convinced that this part of God’s kingdom is better because of us.
Has the Gospel been preached? Of course it has. Has it
touched souls and led to conversion? Of course it has. Have we done
as much as we could? Probably not. Asking whether we have done as
much as we could is not intended to minimize what we have already
done and are now doing. I raise the question so that we might examine
ourselves. This should help and encourage us to seek to do more and to
do it better.

Statistics of the diocese can tell us how many of
our people have been fully initiated through the
sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. We
cannot count how many times the Eucharist has been
offered in the diocese or how many people have
gathered in our churches to hear the word and to receive
the Eucharistic Christ. I ask myself why I am still so
imperfect after all these years of nourishing myself by
worshipping at the altar and receiving the Body and
Blood of Christ. Why am I not doing better? In
humility, the answer must be that the fault is not
Christ’s. It is mine. In this anniversary year, it is good
for us to ask the same question of ourselves not only as
individuals, but as parishes and as a diocese. Have we
done as much as we could? In humility and honesty, we
must say: Of course we haven’t. But the burning
question must be: Why haven’t we?

Our union with Christ is intended to be transformational. It
begins with our baptism, our birth as Christians. Confirmation and
Eucharist complete our initiation. But we are born and initiated into a
community. We are members of a society. We are not independent,
isolated creatures. We are a community. We are the people of God.

The Mass, too, is a social and communal act. In the
Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II, we read, “the liturgy is
thus the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their
lives, and manifest to others the mystery of Christ in the real nature of
the true Church.” In the same document, the Church quotes from the
Mass for Tuesday of Easter week in which we pray that God’s people
“may grasp by deed what they hold by creed.” Prayer shapes our belief.
Our belief inspires our deeds.
Let us go back in our imagination to the Upper Room and look again at Christ humbly kneeling before Peter to wash his feet. The deed is encompassed by the Paschal meal and the first Eucharist. The interconnection should be clear. Christ, the Teacher, chose that sublime moment with a purpose.

Who are the Christians who wash the feet of others today? Who are those who are obedient to Christ’s command: “you must wash each other’s feet ... As I have done, so you must do.” Parents who remain steadfast in their love for the struggling teenager are following Christ’s example and command. Teenagers who share their time to visit the lonely and the homebound; health-care workers who answer the impatient call of the needy patient; priests who hasten to the bedside of the sick and dying; those who give hospitality and food to street people; those who fight for life at all of its stages; those who seek to make our nation a compassionate, welcoming society where all, even sinners, are treated with dignity. They are today’s Christ on bended knee. So, too, are civil officials who seek changes in oppressive political and economic systems. As are business owners who choose people over profits, their communities over unbridled consumerism. Legislators and citizens who work for a society and laws which protect the rights and dignity of the “little ones,” the helpless, are washing the feet of their brothers and sisters. When Christ washed Peter’s feet, He must have known that Peter was soon to deny Him. That did not stop Him. Everyone, even the sinner, has a right to our service.

We Christians are not the only ones who perform humanitarian acts. There are many generous people, believers and unbelievers, who serve humanity and wash the feet of their brothers and sisters. But the significant difference between what we do and what they do, should be that we do it because we are a Eucharistic people. The Eucharist cannot be confined within the walls of our churches. Some good people do good deeds because they are prompted by decent human impulses. We
must do them because Christ showed us how and told us to follow His example. As a people who bend our knees in adoration before the Eucharistic Lord, we are sent out of the church door inspired, motivated, and driven to do what Christ has commanded. We must seek to transform our homes, our neighborhoods, and our society. Through us the kingdom must come. We, in the name of Christ, must seek justice for all.

We are surrounded by people who need us and need our service. We do not do service, we are service. We must not wait until we are asked. Peter did not ask to have his feet washed. We cannot be like the rich man who walked by Lazarus at his gate. Lazarus was invisible to the rich man who realized his mistake only when he stood before God. Perhaps his greatest sin was not that he did nothing, but that he didn’t see Lazarus in need. In Matthew’s Gospel, which describes the last judgment, those who were invited to inherit the kingdom are the ones who washed the feet of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. All of these are still with us. They are rich and poor, old and young, male and female, sinners and saints, attractive and unattractive. They all need Christ and therefore they need us.

At the beginning of each Eucharistic Liturgy, we are asked to call to mind our sins. We then ask a merciful God for forgiveness. When the penitent woman in Luke’s Gospel washed Christ’s feet with her tears, He forgave her sins. The act was not only loving, but also penitential. At the conclusion of the Eucharist, we are told to “go and serve.” When Christ appeared in glory on the mountain to Peter, James, and John, Christ did not permit them to tarry there. They came down from the mountain. It was only when the apostles left the Upper Room at Pentecost that the Church began to continue the mission of Christ. At the Ascension, the two men in white asked the men of Galilee, “Why do you stand here looking up at the skies?” As sweet as it is to worship God with our brothers and sisters at the Eucharist when we direct our gaze heavenward, we must go out the church door and direct our gaze outward to those around us. We do not wait until they
ask to have their feet washed. As sensitive caring people, shaped by the Eucharist, we will see the need. We will initiate the loving service.

Scripture reminds us that Christ frequently went to a quiet place to pray. But His prayer was always a prelude to His deeds. He walked the dusty roads of His homeland. He went about doing good. The distinctive mark of Christians should be our love for one another. Love is expressed in deeds, deeds which are humbling and frequently difficult. Christ is walking through our towns and villages today. We are privileged to carry on His work. His mission begins when we walk out the church door. As we service one another on bended knee, we become modern images of Christian Art.

Jesus, Teacher and Lord. Help us to understand more profoundly what you taught us when you knelt and washed your disciple's feet. Our lives are to imitate yours. We seek to be prayerful, as you were prayerful. Help us to understand that we are in the midst of our brothers and sisters as servants, as foot washers. Help us overcome pride which prevents us from doing so. Give sight to our blindness which prevents us from seeing those who need us. Help us to see how we can best serve them. Help us to understand and live the lesson you taught at the first Eucharist. You have told us that unless we do so, we will have no share in your heritage. Grant that after we have gathered around the Eucharistic table we will go forth from the church with a new commitment that as a Eucharistic people we are to love and serve you by serving one another.

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