

## BEING GROUNDED

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For all of its ritualistic solemnity, this liturgy with its act of foot washing is deeply embarrassing. I've often wondered why. After all, many of us enjoy getting a manicure or a foot massage and walk around all summer in one kind of sandal or another. So it's not feet *per se* that causes the embarrassment.

No, what causes the embarrassment is the fact that we find this foot-washing to be humiliating for everyone concerned: the priest, those being washed, and those who look on. And that, of course, is the point. The word humility comes directly from the Latin word *humilitas*, which means not only humble, but because it derives from *humus*—earth—means also grounded. In this act of humble service—this mandatum—we are confronted with the uncomfortable truth that though we spend much of our lives trying to put ourselves and others on pedestals of one kind or another, all of us need to strive to live lives grounded in the example of Christ's servant ministry.

Tonight's liturgy says as much in these words of the celebrant: "Therefore I invite you who share in the royal priesthood of Christ, to come forward, that I may recall whose servant I am by following the example of my Master." One of the uncomfortable truths about ordained ministry is that people often put their priests on pedestals, and imbue them with all kinds of impossible virtues. And this can lead to all kinds of notions of grandeur, or spiritual arrogance, or—who would believe it?—an inflated sense of self.

However, all of you—all of us—are, as we are reminded in First Peter, a royal priesthood. Clergy are simply ordained to ministry so that they might become a priest for the priests; you see your own God-given priesthood mirrored in them. Their profession is such that they stand as representatives and examples of the priestly vocation all baptized people are called to exercise. To underscore that fact, the celebrant in our liturgy goes on to say, "But come remembering his admonition that what will be done for you is also to be done by you to others." In other words, we're all in this together.

Tonight, the Church calls all of its people—lay and ordained—to climb down off our pedestals of preferment and position and prestige and learn again what it is to follow the servant king. We are called to remember that we are here to serve the world, not to be served, and that none of us is any better than the rest, for we are all one human family.

And since we are all one human family, we'd better get our feet on the ground and go out into a world torn by hostility and competition, a world where love of self trumps love of the stranger, a world in which success is measured by how much we get rather than in what we give away, a world which has trampled underfoot everything God has made and loved, but nonetheless is a world we are called to serve no matter how dirty, smelly, or deformed. For only the love that lives by giving itself away in death can make ugliness beautiful and transform humiliation into glory.