

Living together the washing of the feet



The meaning of our action

On the night before his death, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples with much love and humility and said « *For I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done for you* ».

What humility, what an example of service, of goodness! Jesus teaches us by this gesture, to put ourselves at the service of one another with love and gentleness. He teaches us to go spiritually on our knees before our brothers and sisters, especially the poorest ones.

We are going to wash each other's feet, in an atmosphere of prayer, of silence, knowing that it is a time of grace. Saint Bernard liked to say that the washing of feet was a sacrament, that is to say, a moment, when, Jesus, by his love, joins us. To be sure, washing each other's feet is a symbol. However, it reveals our desire to forgive, to be forgiven, to serve with humility, to become smaller, poorer. Thus, to wash each other's feet becomes for each one of us a prayer.

This gesture has also a particular significance from the point of view of unity. If we cannot always eat together at the same Eucharistic table as our brothers and sisters of other denominations, we can already be deeply united to each other in living through the washing of feet together.

The procedure

Before beginning, several persons will have prepared the room. The chairs will be arranged in (a) circle (s) (one or several depending on the number of participants). At the centre, there are placed a Bible, a candle and a basin, a jug filled with water and a towel. Water will have been placed in reserve, outside the circle, to refill the jug if necessary.

The celebration begins. The candle is lighted. We sing some quiet songs and recollect ourselves to find peace and interior silence. After the songs, the leader will explain the meaning of the evening ceremony « *We are going to wash each others' feet as Jesus has asked us to do* ». And he reads the text of the Gospel of John (13,1-17).

Then he kneels down in front of the person who is on his right in the circle and washes his two feet very slowly, with a great deal of love and respect. This is a sacred gesture. He wipes the feet. When he has finished, he remains on his knees before the person. This latter person puts her hands on the head of the other, and they both pray in silence. This is a gesture of mutuality and reciprocity. After several moments of prayer, the who has had her feet washed, rises and kneels before the person on her right and washes his feet... and so on, until each member of the community has had his/her feet washed.



During all this time of the washing of feet, we can arrange for background music or softly sing a refrain (from Taizé, for example).

Certain persons with difficulties must be helped in order to be able to accomplish all these gestures. However, it is important for them to experiment with this responsibility of service. When the gesture of the washing of feet appears to be difficult, even impossible to carry out, it is up to each leader to intervene with kindness to make one or other of the participants not feel guilty, and suggest, for example, the simple washing of hands.

In sharing groups

After this celebration, we remain in a circle and we share our reflections on several questions.

- Why does this gesture collect us together, unite us?
- What are the actions, the words, the attitudes in my life which can construct unity?
- When I find myself with a person very different from myself, in whose presence I feel « frozen », or whom I find disagreeable, can I try to imagine in my heart, that I am kneeling down to wash his/her feet and then, that he/she in their turn, is washing mine.

At the end, we sing together « *Ubi Caritas* » and recite the « *Our Father* » holding each others' hands.

Jean Vanier