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# Mercy MOMENTS.

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## An Easter Reflection



**In organising the Holy Thursday liturgy over the years, I have discovered that not everyone likes the small act of humble service we do in the washing of the feet.**

Several years ago I invited Jeremy, the chairman of our parish council, to have his feet washed on Holy Thursday. “Absolutely not!” Jeremy snapped back, which was not his usual style. “Look, I’m sorry,” he went on, “but I find that whole thing appalling: bare feet, water, and wiping. It’s all disgusting. And I saw you kiss the foot of someone last year. It might’ve been fine for Jesus to get down and dirty in first-century Palestine, but not here and now. I can barely watch this ritual, let alone be part of it.”

I felt like saying, “Jeremy, don’t hold back! Tell me what you’re really thinking!”

Jeremy of course has a valid point. The washing of guest’s feet may have been a custom in Jesus’ day, but it is foreign to Western societies today. Mind you, don’t tell that to anyone who pays good money for a foot massage at a day spa!

Because we are unacquainted with this most important practice, we can miss the significance of one of the most important points in John’s account. In Jesus’ day, a Jewish host certainly never washed his guest’s feet. Indeed, in most houses not even Jewish servants performed this act. It was the task of the least in the house, one for the Gentile, or non-Jewish, servant. No wonder Peter objects to it being done to him by Jesus. And the household codes tell us that it was not done regularly, but only on those occasions where guests who had completed a long trip were received into a home at journey’s end ...

I’ve always been struck by Jeremy’s words: “It might’ve been fine for Jesus to get down and dirty in first-century Palestine, but not here and now.” I don’t want to hold Jeremy out to dry, as though his response was odd or wrong. I had the very same reaction as him on seeing a religious act of love last year. On November 6, 2013, when Pope Francis was on ‘walkabout’ after his General Audience, he came across fifty-three-year-old Vinicio Riva. Vinicio suffers from neurofibromatosis, the disease made famous in the film *The Elephant Man*. What happened next? Pope Francis immediately got down from the pope-mobile, embraced and kissed Vinicio, prayed with him, and blessed him.

I’m ashamed to say that when I saw these images, I knew I would not be able to do what Pope Francis had done. Ritual washing of the feet is one thing; kissing Vinicio would be quite another. But here was the best lesson I’ve had on what the Lord did at the Last Supper.

Welcome to Holy Thursday, where God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, says there is not a part of any of us that is untouchable, that is beyond God’s loving embrace – not one part. This is when our God gets “down and gets dirty” so that we can rise up to claim our dignity as Christ’s disciples, following his lead, and where we commit ourselves again to acts of loving service that set other people free.

Excerpt from *What Are We Hoping For? Reflections on Easter* by Richard Leonard, SJ. Published by Paulist Press 2015

### REFLECTION

- > How are you challenged to commit yourself to acts of loving service that set other people free?
- > Are there times when you resist getting “down and dirty”?