

One more way to wash some feet



This new regular column looks at what the Eucharist means for our work as Catholics in the world of politics. For more on this topic by Robert Dunn, see the Diocese of Manchester sourcebook called The Resurrection and the Church's Mission in the Public Square at catholicnh.org/public-policy.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF POLITICS?

A priest friend of mine from Washington, D.C. once posted a Holy Thursday Facebook message to his large circle of friends: “Let’s find some feet to wash.”

Now, if you need a motto for the Church’s work in the public square, there you have it.

Of course, the origins of this act come from the *Gospel of John*. Of the four gospel accounts of the Last Supper, John’s is the only one that does not describe Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist.

Instead, John narrates how Jesus rose from the supper and washed the feet of his disciples, leaving them (and us!) with this enduring mandate, “If I, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” (*Jn 13:15*)

The Church turns to the *Gospel of John* for the Liturgy of the Word during the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist, which begins shortly after this reading, adds a layer of emphasis. The

directives in the Roman Missal call for this part of the Mass to open with a procession of the faithful bearing gifts for the poor, to be accompanied by the singing of a designated hymn, “Wherever there are charity and love, there is God.”

These dots are easy enough to connect. We can easily see how we are carrying out the Lord’s command of charity and love when we give money or food to the poor. What may be less readily apparent, though, is that this commandment also calls us to service in the public square.

As I’ve noted here before, Pope Francis’ insight that “politics is one of the highest forms of charity because it seeks the common good” seems counterintuitive. We often see politics as a hyper-partisan enterprise that has self-interest or the maintenance of power as its primary goals.

But if you want some support for Pope Francis’ perspective, look no further than our own founding fathers. John Adams described the body politic as a social compact “that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good.”

The very first article of the New Hampshire Constitution, modeled after what Adams wrote for the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, declares that government “is instituted for the general good.”

So, this notion that political engagement is ultimately designed to serve others is something that we have inherited from both the religious and secular sides of the family, so to speak. As Catholic Americans, it is doubly in our wheelhouse.

This means that we have invaluable perspectives to share in the political arena: that faith and reason go hand in hand, that human beings possess inalienable dignity and that there is a special obligation to stand up for those who are poor or powerless.

As Pope Benedict said in London in 2010, religion “is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation.”

It is no coincidence that two of the most important political movements in our nation’s history — the campaign to abolish slavery and the crusade for civil rights — grew out of and were sustained by the religious faith of the people who led and populated those movements.

These examples show just how much of a difference we can make if we follow this same path of loving and humble service.

Of course, we should never consider politics a default approach or more important than our individual encounters with people or our personal responsibility toward the poor and those in need.

This is where the rubber really hits the road for us as Christians. The story of the Day Café in this issue of *Parable* is just one obvious example.

Instead, we should see our work in politics simply as a way to fulfill the Lord’s command of love on an even broader scale than we can accomplish by acting alone.

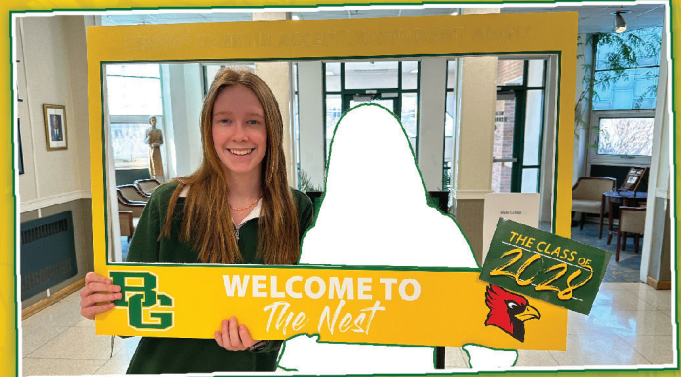
As Pope Francis said in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, “If someone helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a fine act of charity. The politician, on the other hand, builds a bridge, and that too is an act of charity.”

So, if we are to follow the Lord, we also have to “rise from the supper” and look to our sisters and brothers in need. Don’t think of it as politics — think of it as just one more way to wash some feet. ■

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On Saturday, February 10, 2024, the feast of Saint Scholastica, Fr. Celestine Hettrick, O.S.B. was ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Robert Deeley, Bishop of Portland.

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