I Am Not Worthy

A Catholic Reflection on the Words of Saint John the Baptist

"The same is he that shall come after me, who is preferred before me:
the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to loose."

John 1:27 · Douay-Rheims



From a Catholic perspective, the statement of John the Baptist:

"After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

(cf. Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16, John 1:27)

---

is one of the richest Christological statements in the Gospels. The Church Fathers, theologians, and Catholic commentators have drawn multiple layers of meaning from it.

---

1. The Literal Meaning: John's Humility

At the most immediate level, John is declaring his profound humility before Christ.

In the ancient world, untying sandals was among the lowest tasks of a servant. A Jewish disciple might perform many services for his rabbi, but untying sandals was considered so degrading that it was generally reserved for slaves.

"I am not even worthy to perform the work of the lowest slave for Him."

The Catholic tradition sees this as a model of authentic holiness. The greater John becomes in sanctity, the more clearly he recognizes Christ's infinite greatness.

As St. Augustine observed, John is not exaggerating; he is acknowledging the infinite distance between a creature and the Creator.

---

2. Recognition of Christ's Divinity

John is not merely saying Jesus is a greater prophet.

John himself is the greatest of the prophets because he directly announces the Messiah. Yet he declares himself unworthy even of the lowest service to Christ.

Why? Because Jesus is not merely another prophet.

- the eternal Son of God,
- the Word made flesh,
- the Creator entering His creation.

Thus John's humility is actually a confession of Christ's divinity.

The Catholic Church sees in this statement an implicit proclamation that Jesus is infinitely above every prophet, saint, angel, and human being.

---

3. The Infinite Difference Between Baptisms

Immediately after speaking of the sandals, John says:

"I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John's baptism could prepare.
Christ's baptism could transform.

John could call sinners to repentance.
Christ could forgive sins and communicate divine life.

Thus John's unworthiness also points to the immeasurable superiority of Christ's mission.

---

4. The Bridegroom Symbolism

One of the most beautiful Catholic interpretations comes from the Gospel of John.

John later says:

“The friend of the bridegroom rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice.” (John 3:29)

In ancient Jewish law there was a custom connected to sandals.

In the Book of Ruth, removing a sandal could be part of a legal claim concerning marriage and redemption.

Some Church Fathers saw John saying:

“I am not worthy to claim the Bride.”

The Bride belongs to Christ.
The Church is Christ's Bride.
John is not the Messiah.
John is not the Bridegroom.
John is only the friend of the Bridegroom.

Christ alone has the right to take the Bride unto Himself.

This interpretation became especially beloved among many Fathers of the Church.

---

5. The Mystery of the Incarnation

Some Fathers saw the sandal itself symbolically.

A sandal touches the earth.

Christ's humanity is the means by which God walks among men.

The divine nature is hidden beneath the “sandal” of His human nature.

John is saying in effect:

“Even the mystery of His humanity is beyond my full comprehension.”

St. Gregory the Great develops this line of thought, seeing the sandal as representing the mystery of the Incarnation itself.

---

6. The Holiness of Christ

In Scripture, removing sandals is often associated with holy ground.

When Moses encounters God at the burning bush, he hears:

“Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”

John's statement echoes this theme.

Christ Himself is the true Holy Ground.

John recognizes that he stands before the very presence of God.

His response is awe and reverence.

---

7. The Pattern of Christian Discipleship

The Church also sees John as the model disciple.

His entire life points away from himself and toward Christ:

"He must increase; I must decrease." (John 3:30)

The sandal saying expresses this same spirituality.

John refuses every temptation to self-exaltation.

He understands that his role is not to attract followers to himself but to direct them to Jesus.

This is the vocation of every Christian, every priest, every bishop, and every saint.

---

8. A Eucharistic Reading

Some Catholic spiritual writers have connected John's statement to Eucharistic humility.

If John, the greatest prophet, considered himself unworthy even to untie Christ's sandal, then how much greater is the mystery that Christ allows us:

- to receive Him in Holy Communion,
- to become temples of the Holy Spirit,
- to share in His divine life.

This perspective often leads naturally to the prayer before Communion:

"Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof..."

The attitude is the same as John's: awe before a God who nevertheless comes near.

A Contemplative Summary

Taken together, the Catholic tradition hears John saying something like this:

> "I am the voice; He is the Word.
> I am the servant; He is the Lord.
> I baptize with water; He baptizes with the Holy Spirit.
> I prepare the way; He is the Way.
> I announce the Bridegroom; He claims the Bride.
> I am a creature; He is the Creator.
> Therefore I am not worthy even to untie the sandals of His feet."

In that one sentence, John simultaneously reveals his own humility, Christ's divinity, the mystery of the Incarnation, the coming of the sacraments, the Bridegroom's love for the Church, and the proper posture of every soul before Jesus Christ.

Companion Song

"I Am Not Worthy"

Continue the meditation through music.

Scan to watch on Four Angry Dachshunds PeerTube

Visit Four Angry Dachshunds

Stories · Meditations · Prayer Cards · Music

Scan to visit the Four Angry Dachshunds home page