The Great Reversal

A Catholic Reflection on John the Baptist and the Washing of the Feet

“There cometh after me one mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and loose.”

Mark 1:7 · Douay-Rheims

“He riseth from supper, and layeth aside his garments, and having taken a towel, girded himself. After that, he putteth water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of the disciples, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.”

John 13:4–5 · Douay-Rheims



1. The Great Reversal

John says:

“I am not worthy to touch His feet.”

Yet at the Last Supper, Jesus kneels and touches the feet of His disciples.

The One whose sandals no one is worthy to untie becomes the One who washes the feet of sinners.

The infinite Lord becomes the servant.

This is the mystery of divine humility.

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2. John's Humility vs. Christ's Humility

John's statement reveals the humility of man before God.

Foot washing reveals the humility of God before man.

John says:

"I am beneath Him."

Jesus says through His actions:

"I have come to serve you."

The two scenes belong together.

One reveals who Christ is.

The other reveals what Christ does with His greatness.

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3. The Lowest Servant

In the ancient world, washing feet was even lower than untying sandals.

People walked dusty roads in open sandals.

Foot washing was the work of household slaves.

Yet at the Last Supper:

The King of Kings performs the work of the lowest servant.

St. Paul describes this mystery:

"Though he was in the form of God... he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." (Philippians 2:6-7)

John the Baptist says he is unworthy to perform a slave's task for Christ.

Christ then freely performs a slave's task for His disciples.

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4. Peter's Reaction

Peter reacts much like John would have.

When Jesus approaches him, Peter says:

"You shall never wash my feet."

Peter knows what John knew:

This is backwards.

The Holy One should not be kneeling before sinners.

The Master should not be serving servants.

The Creator should not be washing creatures.

Peter's protest is really the same astonishment expressed by John.

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5. A Foreshadowing of the Cross

Catholic theology sees the washing of feet as a preview of Calvary.

At the Last Supper, Jesus stoops down.

At the Cross, He stoops even lower.

The One who washes dusty feet will soon wash souls in His Blood.

The basin points to the Cross.

The water points to Baptism.

The towel points to the servant form He assumed in the Incarnation.

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6. The Sandals and the Incarnation

Recall the patristic interpretation that the sandal symbolizes Christ's humanity—the means by which God walks among men.

John says:

"I am not worthy to untie His sandal."

Yet Jesus removes His outer garment, wraps Himself with a towel, and bends down before His disciples.

The mystery John considered himself unworthy even to touch now bends down to touch humanity.

God comes closer than anyone imagined.

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7. The Eucharistic Connection

The foot washing occurs during the Last Supper.

This is not accidental.

The same Jesus who kneels to wash feet is about to give:

His Body,
His Blood,
His very Self.

The logic is the same:

John says:

"I am not worthy."

The Church says before Communion:

"Lord, I am not worthy..."

Yet Christ still comes.
He still serves.
He still feeds.
He still washes.
He still gives Himself.

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8. The Bridegroom Connection

Earlier we discussed Christ as Bridegroom.

At the Last Supper the Bridegroom kneels before His Bride.

The Church Fathers often saw the foot washing as a symbolic cleansing of the Church before the wedding feast of the Lamb.

The Bridegroom does not merely claim the Bride.

He purifies her.
He prepares her.
He makes her beautiful.

Just as Christ will later wash the Church with His Blood, He first washes the disciples' feet.

Scripture Foundations

Each movement of this meditation rests upon Scripture. A key passage is given below in the Douay-Rheims, followed by additional references for prayer and study.

1. The Great Reversal

“There cometh after me one mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and loose.”

Mark 1:7 · Douay-Rheims

See also: John 13:4–5; Mark 10:45

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2. John's Humility vs. Christ's Humility

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John 3:30 · Douay-Rheims

See also: Philippians 2:5–8; John 13:13–15

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3. The Lowest Servant

“He riseth from supper, and layeth aside his garments, and having taken a towel, girded himself.”

John 13:4 · Douay-Rheims

See also: John 13:5, 12–15; Philippians 2:6–7

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4. Peter's Reaction

“Lord, dost thou wash my feet?”

John 13:6 · Douay-Rheims

See also: John 13:7–10

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5. A Foreshadowing of the Cross

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them unto the end.”

John 13:1 · Douay-Rheims

See also: John 19:34; 1 John 1:7; Romans 6:3–4

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6. The Sandals and the Incarnation

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

John 1:14 · Douay-Rheims

See also: Philippians 2:7; Hebrews 2:14

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7. The Eucharistic Connection

“Take ye, and eat. This is my body.”

Matthew 26:26 · Douay-Rheims

See also: Matthew 26:27–28; John 13:1–5; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

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8. The Bridegroom Connection

“He that hath the bride, is the bridegroom.”

John 3:29 · Douay-Rheims

See also: Ephesians 5:25–27; Apocalypse 19:7–9

Individually, each group of Scripture references supports its numbered section. Taken together, however, they form a Scriptural theology of The Great Reversal. Read from beginning to end, they tell one story:

God becomes man -> the Master becomes servant -> the Lord kneels -> the King gives Himself as food -> the Immortal One dies -> the Sinless One cleanses sinners -> the Bridegroom makes His Bride ready for the feast.

And standing at the beginning of it all is John: *"I am not worthy..."*

This is why The Great Reversal is more than a title for one episode in John 13. The pattern runs through the Incarnation, Christ's ministry, the washing of feet, the Cross, Baptism, the Eucharist, and the nuptial mystery of Christ and His Church.

The Church Reflects on This Mystery

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

“Christ's whole life expresses his mission: ‘to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §608

This paragraph is especially fitting because it begins with John the Baptist identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God and then presents Christ as the suffering Servant. John's witness and Christ's self-emptying service are held together within the Church's teaching.

Pope Benedict XVI

“God's greatness is different from our idea of greatness; ... it consists precisely in stooping low, in the humility of service.”

Homily for the Mass of the Lord's Supper, 20 March 2008

Benedict XVI describes Peter's resistance as a “reversal of order”: the Master carries out the slave's service. That is precisely the mystery contemplated here—the Lord before whom man bows is the Lord who first stoops down to serve and save man.

Companion Song

This meditation is also reflected in the companion song *I Am Not Worthy*. Its movement from “Lord, I am not worthy” to Christ's answer—“I know. That is why I came.”—echoes the same great reversal contemplated here.

Scan to hear the companion song

Catechism §608

Scan to open directly to §608

Benedict XVI Homily

Scan to read on the Vatican website

A Contemplative Synthesis

Viewed together, the scenes form a breathtaking picture:

John stands before Christ and says,

“I am not worthy to untie Your sandals.”

Christ later kneels before His disciples and says,

“Then let Me wash your feet.”

Humanity cries,

“Lord, I am not worthy.”

And God replies,

“I know. That is why I came.”

In Catholic spirituality, this is the heart of the Gospel: the infinite majesty of Christ revealed by an even more infinite humility. The One before whom John dared not touch a sandal is the same Lord who kneels, washes, serves, suffers, dies, and gives Himself in the Eucharist so that we might share in His divine life.

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