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## Nisi Pedes, Except for the Feet: Footwashing in the Community of John's Gospel

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## ***Nisi Pedes, Except for the Feet:* Footwashing in the Community of John's Gospel**

In spite of the sometimes stark ritual symbolism of the Fourth Gospel — “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the true vine” (15:1), “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood” (6:52) — efforts to understand the rites of this community from the Gospel itself have yielded only puzzle after puzzle. It seems to me that some of the disparities in the fruits of Johannine research may have arisen because the investigations have taken place within strict disciplinary boundaries. It is my intention in the present investigation to use the fruits of some of the disciplines of biblical studies — literary criticism, redaction criticism, and textual criticism of the Gospel of John, in particular — to shed light on worship in the first century, worship at its earliest extant Christian stratum. In so doing, we will find that what we know about worship in the first century can inform what might be discovered in biblical texts. At the end of the essay I will suggest what some of the ecclesiological, theological, and pastoral implications of the study might be for communities today.

The text at the heart of this study is chapter 13 of John's Gospel, the narrative and discourse of the footwashing scene in verses 2c-20. After highlighting some of the issues that have emerged from biblical studies and its understandings of the text, I will nuance what one can know about the liturgical situation of the earliest Johannine communities and about how the text might reflect some of the contentions about rites in the early Church.

### LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF JOHN 13:2C-20

In general the whole Gospel of John alternates between chunks of narrative — usually describing the actions of Jesus and his disciples — and even longer chunks of discourse from the mouth of Jesus. Below is the text (NRSV) of concern to this investigation; in

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it I have highlighted the words of Jesus so that the reader can readily distinguish the narrative from the discourse:

- And during supper
- 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,
  - 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.
  - 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.
  - 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"
  - 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."
  - 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."
  - 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"
  - 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."
  - 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."
  - 12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"
  - 13 You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am.
  - 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.
  - 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.
  - 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.
  - 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

- 18 *I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen.  
But it is to fulfill the scripture,  
"The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me."*
- 19 *I tell you this now, before it occurs,  
so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.*
- 20 *Very truly, I tell you,  
whoever receives one whom I send receives me;  
and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."*

There have been opposing views about whether this excerpt constitutes a literary unity or what had been independent units brought together into what results in a rather complex literary passage.<sup>1</sup> The basic action of Jesus, as set up in 13:4-5, could have been smoothly succeeded by 13:6-11 to one effect or by 13:12-20 to quite another. It is the juxtaposition of the two in the pericope that poses a literary enigma.

The first part, 13:6-11, characterizes the footbath as a ritual leading to "having a share" (13:8) with Jesus, a foreshadowing — based on its temporal location in the narrative — of the passion of Jesus. The story here reveals the ignorance of the disciples about the significance of the act, for it has Jesus telling them, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (13:7). Moreover, this section, representing the footwashing as a sign of death, would suggest that the rite was a one-time occurrence in the life of the follower of Jesus, much like baptism by immersion.

In the second part of the pericope, 13:12-20, Jesus readily reveals to the disciples what he had in verse 7 told them they would only later understand. Also, the footwashing is characterized as an act of service and humility, one which — differing from the significance imputed to the act in the first part — is able to be repeated: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done" (13:15). The irreconcilability of these various points — about the significance of the action as sharing in the life of Jesus or as an act of service and humility; about the disciples' understanding only in the future or their understanding in the present; about the repeatability or irrepeatability of the action — suggests that the

<sup>1</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, "John 13:1-20, The Footwashing in the Johannine Tradition," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 73 (1982) 31-51.

two parts were not of a whole, but rather two interpretations of a rite juxtaposed in the Gospel and, some time later, in the canon.

#### REDACTIONAL CRITICISM AND JOHN 13:1-20

Raymond Brown had it right when he taught regarding the redaction of this pericope that "[c]losely related to the problem of one or more symbolic meanings for the footwashing is the problem of whether vss. 1-20 constitute an original unit."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this at first sounds like the same issue raised above about the significances of the two basic parts, but there remains — even after the discovery of two traditions — the question about the origins of these traditions. Did these have the same source? Did they appear simultaneously, or is one older than the other?

There are various reasons for dismissing the possibility of their simultaneity, for thinking that there was one part which was integral to the original pre-Johannine narrative and the other juxtaposed by a redactor.<sup>3</sup> There are four main pieces in fixing the order of their reception into the Gospel:

1. Commonly, in trying to ascertain the pre-Johannine narrative from the forms that exist in the present story, it is held that the narratives were original and to these were appended discourses. If this is so, then 13:6-11 is the narrative, with a few sentences from the mouth of Jesus included in it, and 13:12-20 is the discourse.
2. Raymond Brown has suggested that the final redaction of the Gospel of John might have been done by the author of the Epistles of John. If this is so, then the emphases on humble service and love for one another of those Epistles and of the second half of the footwashing pericope are compatible.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday 1966, 1970) 559.

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive treatment of the redaction of the Gospel of John, see Robert Tomson Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1988). Although Fortna's study is informative on the redaction of the Gospel as a whole, he does not deal with the footwashing pericope: "[T]he material has evidently been so greatly rewritten, perhaps more than once — as, for example, the overloading and redundancy in vv. 1-3 seem to show — that reconstruction of the source now seems too tenuous to be practicable."

3. Another clue is the lack of connection between the content of the narrative and of the discourse. While the typical Johannine literary tool is to have an action followed by an interpretation of that same action in discourse, here the two are virtually unrelated to one another. In fact, little in the discourse links it to the footwashing itself, merely a few words in the second half of verse 14. The section of verses 6–11 is different, for it is loaded with references to the footwashing rite. The dialogue in this earlier part, for instance, could go only with the footwashing, while the sayings of verses 12–20 — but for 14b — are general and could have been effortlessly emended by the redactor to fit in with any number of actions in the Johannine life of Jesus.
4. The placement of the pericope in the narrative of the Gospel as a whole would indicate that the first piece, 6–11, was original to the narrative, for the footwashing, as a participation in the passion (verse 7), would precede the Johannine narratives of the betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus.

These four conditions point to the first part of the pericope as the original to which was added the discourse with its teaching on service and humility, issues relevant to a redactor such as the author of the Johannine Epistles.

#### TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND JOHN 13:10

At the beginning of an article on establishing the text of John 13:10 and studying the threads of interpretation of this single verse, N. M. Haring writes that “[f]or both textual and exegetical reasons the interpretation of John 13:10 has long been the object of controversy.”<sup>4</sup> While Haring’s claim is no doubt true, the liturgical content of this oft-debated text raises the ante to touch on our interests as well as on the textual and exegetical studies. Yet, perhaps because biblical matters run the gamut here, the liturgical content of the many variants have not been considered in relation to the places of origin of the various manuscripts (where these can be known).

<sup>4</sup> N. M. Haring, “Historical Notes on the Interpretation of John 13:10,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13 (1951) 355–80, the quote from 355.

In the Greek New Testament there are seven variants listed for a crucial portion of John 13:10ab.<sup>5</sup> The full verse is:

λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ὁ λελουμένος οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι, ἀλλ' ἔστιν καθαρὸς ὅλος

while the variants for the middle part are:

- A. οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι
- B. οὐκ χρείαν ἔχει εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι
- C. οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι
- D. οὐ χρείαν ἔχει ἢ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι
- E. οὐ χρείαν ἔχει εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας μόνον νίψασθαι
- F. οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν νίψασθαι
- G. οὐ χρείαν ἔχει τὴν κεφαλὴν νίψασθαι εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας μόνον

Though these are listed here in Greek only, the manuscripts of the various versions are both Greek and Latin, a few sources with both. For purposes of liturgical study, the manuscript evidence can readily be separated by grouping those which have the *εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας* (or *nisi pedes*) (A, B, C, D, E, G) and those which do not (F).

One of the basic rules of textual criticism is that the shorter reading is to be preferred, yet this presents a kind of dilemma in the case of John 13:10. The shorter reading (F) does have early distribution but it is relatively sparse.<sup>6</sup> Among the witnesses are Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth-century Alexandrian witness; Tertullian; the primary version of the Vulgate (Wordsworth and White); two Old Latin versions (though rather late); and it is also found in Origen. Many textual critics have favored this shorter version by commenting that the footwashing — in its placement at the meal

<sup>5</sup> Since there are just a few Greek words involved in interpreting this fraction of John 13:10, below is a brief lexicon of the vocabulary in the seven variants:

οὐκ, οὐ = not  
ἔχει = has  
χρείαν = need  
εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας = except for the feet  
νίψασθαι = to wash  
μόνον = only  
τὴν κεφαλὴν = the head

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Aland *et al.*, eds., *The Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies 1975) 383–84.

before the death of Jesus — prefigures the complete cleansing that will then be accomplished: ἀλλ' ἔστιν καθαρὸς ὅλος. Variations on this have been taken up by some biblical theologians to support the shorter text.

The problem with the shorter version is in trying to ascertain its meaning, for without “except for the feet” one is left with, “Jesus said to [Peter], ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, but is entirely clean.’” Within the narrative as it would come to us without “except for the feet,” the verse makes little sense.

The longer readings themselves show a large measure of variety, but most of these variants — if considered individually — are not uncommon in New Testament criticism. Some can be taken away from our concern simply because of the transposition of *χρείαν* and *ἔχει*. Such transposition is operative in A, B, C, D, and E, and could be the result of a mere transposition of the two words, done by scribes perhaps accidentally or because they thought it would have sounded better in proclamation. The variants of *οὐκ* and *οὐ* are a result of the juxtaposition of these words next to either vowels or consonants.

In spite of the lack of certainty introduced by the many variants, the presence of “except for the feet” has early, significant, and wide distribution. It has the support of the second- third-century Proto-Alexandrian papyrus (p66); second- third-century Syriac; third- and fourth-century Coptic manuscripts (Sahidic, Bohairic, and Sub-Achmimic); and the Codices Vaticanus (fourth century) and Bezae (fifth). In the West, the phrase is supported by many Old Latin versions of the fourth and fifth centuries, as well as in the works of Augustine.<sup>7</sup>

In the Vulgate the primary reading for 13:10 is: *dicit ei Iesus qui lotus est non indiget ut lavet sed est mundus totus*, that is, the shorter reading. But among the variants one finds *nisi pedes* in various configurations. In a version from or near Milan, the *nisi pedes* is an addition to the manuscript, not in the original hand. There are

<sup>7</sup> Most Greek New Testaments list Origen as a witness to both the longer and the shorter versions. More recent study, however, has found spurious the one citation in which Origen gives witness to the inclusion of “except for the feet.” See Bart D. Ehrman, Gordon D. Fee, and Michael W. Holmes, *The Text of the Fourth Gospel in the Writings of Origen*, vol. one (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1992) 274-75.



manuscripts from Florence and from Spain that also give witness to the additional words.<sup>8</sup>

John Christopher Thomas's conclusion to his textual study of the verse highlighted for me the need for the attention of historians of the liturgy to this verse and pericope. While illuminating in the way it lined up the evidence for and against the shorter and longer readings, his study finishes enigmatically: "The most obvious implication of this text critical decision for the present study is that by retaining *εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας* the place of the footwashing in the Johannine community must be reconsidered. The disciples (and in them the community) are told that since they have bathed, they have no need to wash except the feet, which implies that their bath (baptism) needs to be supplemented by footwashing."<sup>9</sup>

The author, then, drew his conclusion on the ill-founded presumption that the footwashing and "baptism" are necessarily two separate, if perhaps related, rites, with the latter ritually dependent on the former. The footwashing, in his interpretation, could only have been a mere supplement to baptism. But, one should ask, does the Gospel of John warrant such an assumption? Might not the footwashing itself, especially as this is captured in 13:6-10, have been the initiatory rite of some Johannine communities? Might it not have been the rite of sanctification which wiped away one's sin or, to take from the Gospel, "made one entirely clean"? Recall the text's "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8), and "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet" (13:10). With these verses the footwashing takes on far more gravity than any of the same Gospel's few references to baptism, to which we now turn.

#### BAPTISM AND FOOTWASHING

##### IN THE COMMUNITY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

A case for initiation by footwashing in the communities of John's Gospel would certainly be stronger if no alternative means of initiation — or "having a share" in Jesus — were expressed in the

<sup>8</sup> Bonifatio Fischer *et al.*, eds., *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1969) 1683-84.

<sup>9</sup> John Christopher Thomas, "A Note on the Text of John 13:10," *Novum Testamentum* 29 (1987) 46-52, quote from 52. The pieces in parentheses are in the original.

narrative. But, for better or worse, the word "baptism" is not absent from this Gospel; yet its appearances do not lend themselves for a sense of strong tradition regarding such a rite. Most appearances of the word in John's Gospel refer not to Jesus but to John the Baptist.

In 1:25-33, for example, the Pharisees ask, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal' " (1:25-27). Yet Jesus is then described as a baptizer when, a few verses later, John says, "The one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit' " (1:33). Notice, however, that this is clearly not a baptism involving water, for John distinguishes his baptizing from that of Jesus by saying, "I baptize with water" (3:26). To complicate the evidence even further, the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of John is not baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, as happens in the narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Might, then, the Johannine footwashing be the "baptizing" described in the beginning of the story?

We can answer with only "perhaps." The complexity of the evidence would make this at least a possibility, but the case for a footwashing initiation cannot be made with any certitude from the text alone, especially when the meaning of the word "baptize" is considered. The primary meaning of *βάπτω, βαπτίζω* before and up to the time of the writing of the New Testament is "to dip in or under," less frequently "to immerse." Its use meaning to bathe or wash — as it would be in a footwashing rite — is only occasional in Hellenism.<sup>10</sup> None of the word's other appearances in the New Testament suggest such an interpretation, nor is any form of the word used at all in or even near the footwashing pericope of John 13.

A few chapters into the Gospel one finds that "Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized" (3:22). This looks rather unambiguous at first glance, yet within a few verses the evangelist

<sup>10</sup> See Albrecht Oepke, "*βάπτω, βαπτίζω*," in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *TDNT* 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1964) 529-46.

retracts this assertion, adding, "although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized" (4:2). It is a kind of Johannine bait and switch, really, for clearly, at some level — in the original narrative or in a redaction of that narrative — there was an antipathy in the community to portraying Jesus as one who baptized. The cautious retraction of Jesus as one baptizing may have been an effort to dissociate him from the movement of John the Baptist.

So, the Gospel of John offers only a mixed bag in answer to the question of whether Jesus baptized those who followed him. Even ascertaining that he baptized would still not provide us with the ritual means by which he did so.

The pericope 13:6-11 has certain elements suggesting that the rite could very well have been an initiation action in its own right, not merely as the "supplement" described by John Thomas in the quote above. The theologically and liturgically weighty statement to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," surely lends itself to this understanding. That the rite of the first part of the pericope is not to be repeated also gives it an initiatory character.

#### THE JOHANNINE CHURCH AND ITS RITES

The foregoing ambivalences about both baptism and footwashing in the Fourth Gospel should be weighed in with the ecclesiology of the text. Readers and hearers of the Gospel often think of it as a narrative revealing the values, theology, experiences, and practices of "the Community of the Beloved Disciple."<sup>11</sup> But closer to the truth is that the Gospel captures that community not at its acme, but as it is ceding to the authority and symbolic leadership of Petrine communities. Moreover, although more recent scholarship, at least on the popular level, has painted this beloved disciple as the hero of the community, the passages about the beloved disciple in the narrative are not heroic; they are, in fact, not really heroic at all, but surrendering. Once the strong and trusted leader of a relatively independent community, this beloved disciple, this Christian "other" — if, as Brown argues, this was a historical person — had come to a fork in the ecclesial road of that community, having there to decide whether as a knitted group the

<sup>11</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist 1979).

community could continue on its own independent way — a way found increasingly contrary to others — or whether survival dictated a knitting with these others, former enemies, perhaps.

The Gospel reveals that at least some part of the community joined the communion of churches, and on the way their leader had to pass the mantle onto Peter, the (at least) symbolic leader of the synoptic communities. And so do we find the beloved disciple not being rewarded for his dedication and strength in the narratives in which he appears in the Gospel, but for his passing the power (or insider information) along to Peter — at the supper, in the track meet to the tomb, in the exchanges with the risen Jesus by the sea.

From the evidence seen in what biblical studies has yielded about the footwashing pericope, we can see tensions about worship and liturgy in the communities of the Fourth Gospel which parallel the ecclesiological and theological issues of the late first century. On John 13:2c-20, literary criticism reveals the split meaning of the pericope, the contradictory information that comes from the mouth of Jesus regarding what he is doing or has done by the action. Redaction criticism reveals that it is likely that one tradition within the Johannine community reinterpreted and recast the narrative before the text was canonized; the two traditions were not smoothed out very well in the text, and so we are left to investigate, two millennia later, the remnants in what has come down in the Gospel itself. Textual criticism brings us to that odd verse, 13:10, with its wonderful and frustrating variety in the manuscripts of antiquity and the early middle ages; it leads one to think that, against the "shorter is better" maxim of the discipline, the longer verse — including "except for the feet" (*nisi pedes*) — bears more weight. What might these suggest about worship in the community of the Fourth Gospel and, then, what implications does this have for us today?

#### WORSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY

#### FROM WHICH THE GOSPEL EMERGED

As the ecclesiology of the Johannine community gave way to that of the stronger communities under Peter's authority, is it not likely that the same happened with the community's rites? If so, then we would indeed find that the original narrative and meaning of

the footwashing (that is, 13:6-10) was supplemented by the discourse which adds a new layer of meaning, that of service and humility. From a liturgical point of view, the Gospel itself snaps a fuzzy picture of the time when the community of the Fourth Gospel was blending itself and being blended into the faith, thinking, behavior, and feeling of other communities. The time of the reception of the Gospel of John by the non-Johannine communities was a time of wins and losses on both sides (as are all such unions, be they between individuals or groups of persons). It was a time during which John's community was separating from others with whom they had once been in communion, those now lost, for the most part, to history. And the path of that Johannine community of believers can be an example for us as we try to express our particular community's experience of the paschal mystery in the community's rites, as well as an example of how the rites are instruments of the presence of God in this particular time, in this particular space, and with the very particular people, like ourselves, with whom we worship.

#### WHAT JOHN 13 TEACHES US TODAY

The footwashing, done just once a year in most Christian churches, is a unique rite within the tradition. It easily engages imaginations and stirs up memories of Triduum's past. Below are some of the implications of the present study for studies of the early Church, for the use of the Bible in the liturgy and in liturgical investigations, and for the rite of footwashing itself.

1. *The complex picture of baptism and footwashing in the Gospel of John requires that we ask ourselves some questions about worship in the earliest communities.* How essential, we must ask ourselves, is it that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan? If it is a necessary part of the Jesus tradition, why did the author or redactor of the Gospel of John not include it in the text?

What foundations would be irreparably shaken if John's Gospel presented Jesus of Nazareth as one who initiated by washing feet? Need our present practice change if we found this to be so according to the Fourth Gospel?

How imitative must our rites be of what was done in the earliest communities? What is gained and what lost by such a dependence on "doing it as the early Church did"?

2. *The footwashing pericope challenges contemporary studies of ecclesiology in the New Testament period.* It is common these days in scholarship to see each of the four gospels arising from one particular community. The mix of meanings about baptism and the footwashing in the Gospel of John would qualify such a simple hypothesis. This Gospel clearly represents a variety of meanings and therefore more likely represents the values and rites of more than one community. It captures a period during which several communities were trying to merge or separate, and this results in some blending, some borrowing or stealing, some inventing, and some excising of liturgical practices.

3. *The preaching and music during a footwashing rite need to be attentive to the complex of issues about the gesture in the Gospel of John.* The theological, ecclesiological, and liturgical content of John 13:6-11 should not be ignored. Preaching before the footwashing or the music selected to accompany the rite can compromise by making too neat a picture. Focusing on the interpretation of the rite as one merely of service betrays the complexity of the passage. The complexity of what is found in the canonized text should not be straitened for simplicity's sake alone.

I am not suggesting that the preacher use a chart to navigate the congregation through the various textual variants of the Greek verse 13:10. Yet wholly dismissing the issues of sanctification and Christology in the first part of the pericope, 13:6-11, is not a satisfactory solution. The monologue of Jesus in verses 12-20 alone does not include the full treasure in the gesture; include something of the rhetorical tussle between Peter and Jesus in verses 6-11.

4. *Before the sixteenth century there was no such thing as an immutable text or Gospel.* Worshipping centuries after the invention of the printing press, we can imagine liturgical texts as static and immutable. Yet the gospel pericope examined above in the manuscript tradition cautions us about such assumptions, for there could have been no such experience of a liturgical text as "fixed" when all literature — including the canonical Christian narratives — was written by hand. It is important, then, to realize that there was no such entity as *the* Gospel of John. The Gospel had variants, of many degrees, in its manuscripts.

5. *The catholic character of our worship, if truly incarnational, has to leave some margin for variety.* As a redactor of the Gospel of John added a new layer of meaning and, perhaps, practice with the appendage of 13:12-20, so then should the catholic character of our rites allow for a margin within which our rites can be tailored according to each community's experience of the presence of God in its midst. Each community's unique experience of the paschal mystery will color its liturgical incorporation of the catholic rites into its life. While those with an administrative charism in the Church might prescribe the core, the heart of the rite, there still needs to be a wide margin between this core and how an individual gathering of believers — a community of late twentieth-century beloved disciples — brings such a rite to expression, incarnation. This will include music, environment, art, a configuration of ministries and the particular talents of its ministers.

6. *John 13 asks us to think about how universal, how uninformative our rites must be.* The restoration of ancient initiation practices in recent decades in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has surely revived a rich tradition from the early Church. While the retrieval of the initiation structure of the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus has enlivened our understanding and practice of liturgy and deepened our pastoral theology, we are led to ask ourselves how universal the initiation process needs to be. Can a rite, however ancient, be mandated down to the details from a source outside of the community in which it will be implemented? However welcome and rich a ritual tradition is, must it be used by all people, at all times, and in all places?

The liturgical uniformity of the period from the promulgation of the Missal of Pope Pius V (1570) until the Second Vatican Council was exceptional in the history of Christianity. It is not a coincidence that such a papal mandate of uniformity happened within a century of the invention of the printing press, for up until that invention the possibility of a uniformity of texts — or of rites from a text — would never have occurred to anyone, pope or not. The fluidity of the "manu-script" tradition, *handwritten* texts, precluded this possibility.

The present consideration of footwashing as initiation in the late first- and early second-century Johannine church or churches should broaden our understanding so that we further recognize

that some measure of liturgical variety was normative in the early and medieval Church. A romantic understanding of the history of the liturgy that imagines the ascending Jesus dropping along a Roman Missal (or even a Bible) to the attending apostles can be only romantic.<sup>12</sup> It is not supported by the witnesses of the period.

<sup>12</sup> For this image I am indebted to Father John J. Miller of Philadelphia, who planted it in me during my first course in liturgical studies.

Michael M. Pomedli

## Ojibwa Influences on Virgil Michel

Virgil Michel, founder of this journal, *Worship* (then *Orate Fratres*), has merited consideration in these pages, notably in a commemorative issue in 1988, the fiftieth anniversary of his death.<sup>1</sup> Various writings and his biography rightly dwell on two major phases in Michel's life: the early years until 1930, and the exceedingly productive years, 1933-38. This leaves 1930-33, a relatively unknown phase in his life. I would like briefly to review the interpretations of these three rather uncharacteristic years, and then present an alternate interpretation based on five of his little known writings.

### INTERPRETATIONS OF MICHEL'S YEARS, 1930-33

One interpreter, his biographer Paul Marx, characterizes these three years as an "interesting interlude" from Michel's usually intense activities of research, writing, lecturing, travelling, and ad-

<sup>1</sup> Three articles appeared in that commemorative volume (*Worship*, vol. 62, no. 3, May 1988); front and back cover pages featured pictures of Virgil Michel and excerpts from one or two typed letters.

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