

## Chapter VIII

### Is Washing of the Feet a Sacrament?

The Orthodox worship is full of symbols. The believer gets in to a world where he can experience the salvation events with all his sense organs. In a Sunday liturgy there will be presentations of biblical events (to see), melodious music (to hear), putting of incense (to smell), kiss of peace (to touch) and the Holy Communion (to taste). Jesus' Washing of the Feet of the Disciples is re-enacted every year in churches, where a bishop leads the Passion Week services. What is it actually? Is it a dramatic presentation of an event such as a skit based on a biblical narration? Is it a special service of the Passion Week just like the re-enactment of the procession with palm leaves or of the way of the cross? If yes, then, why it is done only by a bishop? Or is it a special sacrament like the ordination? To answer all these questions we have to examine the biblical narration of the event more carefully.

#### Can Washing of the Feet be a Sacrament?

St. John is the only evangelist, who records the event. But the location of the story in his gospel and the way he presents it is of utmost importance for our discussion. St. John puts the event on the day before Passover Festival of the Jews (Jn 13,1-20). The context is the Last Supper of Our Lord. Instead of giving more importance to the Institution of the Holy Qurbana, as all the three other gospel writers do it, St. John presents the washing of the feet of the disciples as the main event of the day. Can we then call it a sacrament like the Holy Qurbana or the Holy Baptism?

The Latin word *sacramentum* meant originally the oath of a soldier showing his allegiance to his commander; it was a sign of commitment to a higher authority. In this sense the Holy Baptism can well be called a *sacramentum*. The Greek equivalent used in the Early Church was *mysterion*, which meant "mystery". It doesn't convey a negative meaning of "something difficult to be understood" or "doubtful": Rather it tells that the mysteries do not disclose their meaning to the unbelieving eyes. The believer, on the other hand, who participates in a *mystery*, will not be seeing or hearing something with the mind of a man, who is sitting in a theatre or before a TV. He experiences the event as it happens today and he believes that it is beneficial for his spiritual growth.

While the Roman Catholic Church fixed the number of sacraments as seven in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 AD, the Orthodox Churches do not believe in a fixed number of mysteries. For example, in some lists of the Byzantine Churches the Burial Service is considered as a mystery. Even though almost all Orthodox Churches see the seven sacraments as important, they do not consider them as

seven separate sacramental occasions. Confession and Communion go together, while Baptism and Anointment of the Holy Myron are inseparable. However, the general features common to all *sacraments* are the following:

1. There will be an act or word of Jesus as the foundation of every sacrament.
2. Only an ordained priest can handle a sacrament.
3. A symbolic service will be at the center of a sacrament.
4. A sacrament is a means for receiving spiritual gifts by the Grace of God through a symbolic act of the person who handles the service.
5. Sacraments like Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist provides *forgiveness* of sins.

## Characteristic Features of a Sacrament

Now let us go back to Jesus' Washing of the Feet of the Disciples. What are its features?

1. Like the Holy Eucharist Jesus Christ instituted it. Even Holy Baptism can not claim that foundation. Bible says about Jesus Christ receiving baptism from John the Baptist and his teaching about it (see Jn 3, 1-10). But never do we read of Jesus baptizing somebody. Even though St.John records the popular saying that Jesus baptized, he corrects it with a note: "it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized" (Jn 4,2).
2. The symbolic act of Jesus in washing the feet of his disciples is very important for St.John, who does not record the institution of the Holy Eucharist. It is true that St.John elaborates the meaning of the communion in chapter 6. But in chapter 13, where he narrates the events of the evening before the Passover Festival, does St.John mention Jesus' eating of the bread with his disciples only for the sake of telling the story of the betrayal of Judas.
3. Jesus teaches his disciples about love and humility through the symbolic act of washing their feet. The writers of Early Church consider both as spiritual gifts.
4. From the conversation between Jesus and Peter we can conclude that Jesus intended the forgiveness of sins also in the event (see Jn 13,10). Like Confession Jesus interprets it as an act of washing of the sins.

Now we have to repeat the questions raised in the beginning and to ask more: If St.John considered this act of Jesus almost equal to Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist, then why do we limit it as a ceremonial function? If the ordained priests can handle the Holy Qurbana, which is the most important *sacrament/mystery* in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church, then why can't they wash the feet of the people on the Maundy Thursday? Why can't the *Footwashing* be considered as a sacrament, which can be repeated like Confession or Anointment of the Sick? The sacramental theologians may have their own arguments.

But from the point of view of a humble reader of the New Testament I feel that the *Footwashing of Jesus* be given more place in our sacramental life. Especially for the people of a country like India it can convey a good message to the people outside of the Church. The path of service and humility is better for the Indian Church than that of institutionalization and pride. A sacrament of *Footwashing* may be meaningful to the members of the Church also. If we make it a regular service like the Holy Confession it can solve many problems in our community also. Think that there are two groups in a parish and the division becomes very serious on a particular topic. What happens today is that the priest or the bishop may conduct a series of talks and the parties may come to an agreement. But on many occasions the spirit of division may appear without delay. But imagine that the problem is settled in a sacramental atmosphere. If the two parties come together after having the talks and wash their feet mutually in the presence of the priest or bishop and the function is done with the seriousness of a sacrament, then it may create deep commitments in the hearts of the people concerned. They will join mutually and with Christ through a symbolic act, which may become an important event in their lives. An enacted symbol is more meaningful than just words of agreement. It connects people, for the Greek word *syμβάlein* means *to put together*. Its opposite is always the act of a *diabolos*, who divides things. The members of a divided family -between brothers/sisters or between husband and wife- can also have the sacrament of *Footwashing*. I hope this may open a discussion among the readers of *Flame*, which can ignite new innovations.