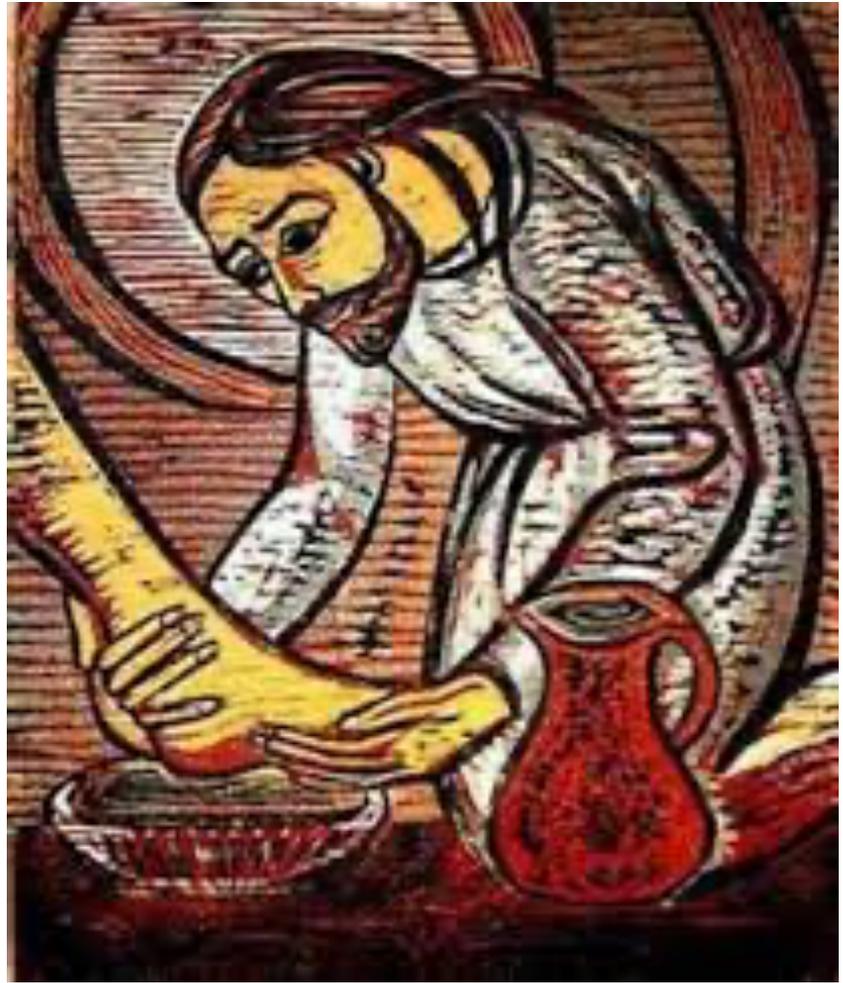


## self-giving love

For better or for worse, the cross is the most prominent image of Christianity. (At one time the ICTUS-fish was the preeminent symbol.) When the symbols of the world's great religions are presented, there is usually the OM of Hinduism, the Star of David for Judaism, the crescent and star of Islam— and the cross for Christianity. Fine, but the Holy Father said something about the cross recently (in his Angelus address March 21) that may sound a little odd. It's important that this sign, the sign of the cross, "be consistent with the Gospel." The cross cannot be and is not first and foremost, or even mainly, a symbol of suffering: the cross always has to express, the cross must always *be*, he says, a symbol of love, a symbol of service, a symbol of "unreserved self-giving." That's the only way that it is "truly the 'tree of life,' of super-abundant life,"<sup>[i]</sup> if it's a symbol of love, a symbol of service, a symbol of unreserved self-giving. And that's why we celebrate the washing of the feet and the self-giving of Jesus in the Eucharist before we venerate Jesus' cross.



I ran into something subtle in the writings of Don Benedetto Calati recently. This is from a well-known essay he wrote called *Historia Salutis*—the history of salvation. It's mainly about how the life of a monk is an insertion into salvation history through our immersion in scripture, as if we ourselves are the next page of the story, the next line, the next word. He says that Christian monasticism distinguishes itself essentially from every other form of natural asceticism and from every other form of ascetical-mystical philosophy because of our relationship to Scripture, by its "integral imitation of Jesus and his life, Jesus who is the center and end of salvation history." And for that reason the true face of (Christian) monasticism isn't found in ascetical exercise and not even in contemplation. The true face of Christian monasticism is found in the degree of charity we have reached. That's what

imitation of Jesus looks like. Because charity is Sacred Scripture brought to completion: “faithfulness to the Covenant, union with the Word, Spouse of the Church, and brother/sister to all.”

I would restate that using my favorite images: *praxis*, *scopos* and *telos*, the means, the goal and the end. Our ascetical life—and of course as always I mean asceticism in the broadest sense of the word, concrete spiritual practice—our ascetical life is our *praxis*, not our end, our *telos*. It’s a means. And even contemplation is not our end; I would say that it’s our goal, a proximate marker on the way. To what? On our way to charity, on the way to love, which is the end, the *telos* and, as Benedetto says, the fulfillment of scripture. Real perfection is always charity, in its two-fold manifestation, not only love of God but also love of neighbor, “to see ourselves as a brother or sister to all.” And that too is why we celebrate the washing of the feet and the self-giving of Jesus in the Eucharist before we venerate his cross. The signature hymn for Holy Thursday is of course *Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est*—“Where charity and love are, that’s where God is.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about social justice and human rights this year, especially with all the issues of racism that have come up in our own country, as well as the obvious human rights disasters going on around the world. I am not about to advocate that we monks of New Camaldoli take to the streets nor necessarily get ourselves involved in big social movements. (Though I have had several conversations with oblates and others who wonder out loud if our own Third Good shouldn’t manifest itself more in at least solidarity with the victims, if not outright raising our voices for them...) But I keep wondering how our kenosis, and self-emptiness in general, seeps out of our cells and under the cloister walls; how self-emptying manifests itself in social policy and in the body politic.

And I got kind of an answer from David Brooks, the conservative columnist for the New York Times who is also Jewish, and who I know I have mentioned before. He recently published a column entitled “The Christian Vision of Social Justice.” The combination of those two things—his being Jewish and a political conservative made his voice in this all the more intriguing to me: a Jew speaking about Christianity and a conservative speaking about social justice, an area that liberals often presume they have a monopoly on. And to his mind this is what the Christian vision of social justice is and this is the line that really caught my eye: he calls it “the ethic of self-emptying love.”<sup>[ii]</sup> And it looks like this: first of all “neither revile the reviler nor allow him to stay in his sin.” Or we are wont to say, you can hate the in without hating the sinner, even in matters of social justice and civil rights. And the Christian approach to power is “to tell those with power to give it up for the sake of those who lack [it]. There is a relentless effort to rebuild relationship because God is relentless in pursuit of us.” A relentless effort to rebuild relationship: that’s what self-emptying love looks like. Of course this is an argument both for non-violence and also

against negative polarization of any kind. That's an ethic built on kenosis; that's what self-emptying love looks like on a grand scale: a relentless effort to rebuild relationship. That's what it looks like when our own asceticism and our contemplative prayer—our union with God—bear fruit in and for the world: a relentless effort to build and rebuild relationship. And that too is why we celebrate the washing of the feet and the self-giving of Jesus in the Eucharist before we venerate his cross.

I am always asking myself who and how are we to be in the world, we as a church and we as individual Christians, we as individual monks and we as a community. I can't say it any better than Pope Francis did himself in that same address, so let's hear his words: Today too, many people, often without saying so, implicitly would like to "see Jesus", to meet him, to know him. This is how we understand the great responsibility we Christians and of our communities have. We too must respond with the witness of a life that is given in service, a life that takes upon itself the style of God – closeness, compassion and tenderness – and is given in service. It means sowing seeds of love, not with fleeting words but through concrete, simple and courageous examples, not with theoretical condemnations, but with gestures of love.

(Side note: Cardinal Schoenborn of Vienna, who served for 25 years at the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, said recently that the Church should always be "*mater et magistra*"—mother and teacher, but "first comes the mother."<sup>[iii]</sup>)

Then the Lord, with his grace, (continues the Holy Father) makes us bear fruit, even when the soil is dry due to misunderstandings, difficulty or persecution, or claims of legalism or clerical moralism. This is barren soil. Precisely then, in trials and in solitude, while the seed is dying, that is the moment in which life blossoms, to bear ripe fruit in due time. It is in this intertwining of death and life that we can experience the joy and true fruitfulness of love, which always, I repeat, is given in God's style: closeness, compassion, tenderness.<sup>[iv]</sup>

May the Lord make us bear fruit even when we feel as if our soil is dry, even in times of trials and solitude, so that we may experience the joy and true faithfulness of love. And may our *praxis* and our contemplation always lead us to love, of which the cross is the great symbol—self-emptying love abandoned to God's will, and brother and sister to all. The cross is before all else a symbol of love, a symbol of service, a symbol of "unreserved self-giving." And that's why we celebrate the washing of the feet and the self-giving of Jesus in the Eucharist before we venerate his cross.

[i] Pope Francis, Angelus Address, March 21, 2021.

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20210321.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20210321.html).

[ii] David Brooks, "A Christian Vision of Social Justice," New York Times, March 18, 2021.

[iii] <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/cardinal-schonborn-vatican-no-to-same-sex-blessings-marked-by-communication-error>.

[iv] Pope Francis, *ibid.*