

Songs of the new commandment (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

For two decades, every Holy Thursday I heard the same voice singing the same song.

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For about two decades, each Holy Thursday at St. Vincent Martyr Church in Madison, New Jersey, I heard our music director, Vicky Martell, sing Shirley Lewis Brown's "The Foot Washing Song":

Put on the apron of humility.
Serve your brother: wash his feet.
That he may walk in the way of the Lord
Refreshed, refreshed.

Vicky had a rich alto voice and she sang the song slowly, plaintively, lovingly. I can still put myself into that moment, with the assembly gathered in that darkened church. The lights around the altar highlighted the women, men, and children who waited on the steps for the presider to kneel before them, pour water on their feet, and dry them tenderly.

Like Peter, some of them were nervous. "You do not know now what I am doing," says Jesus, "but later you will understand." This answer does not calm Peter. But Jesus finally convinces the disciples to allow him to wash their feet. Then he tells them to do likewise. Acting as servant to others is to be their calling going forward.

Underlying the action is this imperative: "Love one another." When I hear those three words proclaimed on Holy Thursday, my memory takes me back to another

church. In the late 1960s I was playing guitar in my parish's first folk group, at the 5 p.m. Saturday mass at St. Thomas the Apostle in Rochester, New York. We sang Sister Germaine's song "Love One Another":

Bear one another's burdens.
And share each other's joys.
Love one another.
Love one another
And bring each other home.

It is amazing how a song can resurrect vivid memory of time and place. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Tridentine mass had given way to the mass of Paul VI and the gradual change from Latin to the vernacular, English in our case. Composers turned to folk music to give songs to young Catholics. Those easy-to-learn songs would help teens and other worshipers sing our way into connecting with the newly reformed liturgy. I ended up becoming a liturgist.

In Roman Catholic and some other churches, there is a ritual at the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy that involves a procession. In my New Jersey parish, the presider carried a covered chalice or pyx containing consecrated hosts from the main church into a chapel, a space set aside for continued prayer and meditation. As we sang the ancient hymn "Sing, My Tongue, the Savior's Glory," the priest and acolytes processed throughout the church. Again, just the thought of that ritual moment and its ritual song makes that experience rise up in my memory. I am transported back into that packed church, where there was hardly enough room for the procession to get by.

This Holy Week, I give special thanks for all the lyricists and composers, the choirs and choir directors, and the cantors and psalmists who have enriched our liturgies. They put scripture on our lips and, thereby, embedded it in our hearts. Because of them, this holy day and every day, we can perhaps more often walk in the way of the Lord, refreshed.