

# Cardinal and Archbishop Wash the Feet of Abuse Victims

**James Martin, S.J.**

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[Irish Central](#) reported today a dramatic scene in Dublin's St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral, part of the Vatican's visitation (that is, investigation) by Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston and Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York of the troubled church in Ireland (H/t Dotcommonweal and Whispers):

In dramatic scenes, the archbishops of Dublin and Boston washed and dried the feet of eight victims of clerical abuse on Sunday in a Dublin cathedral. The archbishops invited five women and three men who were abused to come forward and have their feet washed. Several of them cried as Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston knelt and washed and dried their feet. Martin stated he was deeply sorry for what happened in his Dublin archdiocese. A report last year castigated his predecessors for their actions in covering up for pedophile priests. "For covering up crimes of abuse, and by so doing actually causing the sexual abuse of more children... we ask God's forgiveness," Martin told the congregation. "The archdiocese of Dublin will never be the same again. It will always bear this wound within it." "For them to get down on their knees, it was humbling," said Darren McGavin, 39, who was abused as a child. "I've found it hard to forgive, but today I found a small bit of closure." O'Malley stated that the washing of the feet was a gesture of atonement that was deeply yearned for by the victims. He had been sent to Ireland by the Vatican to seek to repair the deep chasm in the church over pedophile priests.

**Update on Zenit:** In the "Liturgy of Lament and Repentance," Archbishop Martin expressed gratitude to victims who did not "remain silent." "I appeal to you to continue to speak out," he added. "There is still a long path to journey in honesty before we can truly merit forgiveness."

Earlier, Archbishop Martin and Cardinal O'Malley lay prostrate before the cathedral's main altar in another highly symbolic act, with the two men using the same gesture performed by the presider each year during the Good Friday liturgy, which serves as a sign of sinfulness and repentance. (The washing of the feet is performed at the Holy Thursday Mass, as another symbolic gesture of penance, and a sign of the humble foot-washing that Jesus himself did for his disciples at the Last Supper.) These kinds of ritual penances are necessary. Of course these are *by no means* the only penances that need to be done by church leaders; nor are such liturgical acts a substitute for real reform in the church or for real restitution to the victims; nor are such symbolic penances sufficient to end the scourge of sexual abuse in the church. Nor do they excuse the crimes of priests or exculpate those who covered them up. By no means.

But these kinds of gestures can sometimes speak to something deep within the Catholic soul, and I've long thought that such public acts were necessities in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. Symbols always point to something greater; and these acts speak in a unique way to both the one doing them and the one seeing them. Last year I wrote a meditation on the need for penance in the church, on [HuffingtonPost](#), and suggested that besides real penances (among them resignations, reforms and

restitutions) some dramatic public acts were called for, and mentioned this penitential gesture, along with the underlying theological rationale. All of this is best understood in the context of the sacrament of reconciliation, which besides asks for not only confession of sins and a "firm purpose of amendment," but also penance. In other words, the sacrament of reconciliation can offer an important template for real penance, substantive reform and the beginning of healing in our church.

Sometimes a bishop proclaims his faults publicly, in a letter or during a liturgical event. In March, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, archbishop of Vienna and president of the Austrian bishops' conference, [read out a dramatic statement at St. Stephen's Cathedral](#). "Some of us have talked about the gracious God," he said, "and yet done evil to those who were entrusted to them." These symbolic actions can help to heal (although the "some of us" is maddeningly vague). But they are not penances; they are confession. A penance goes further. One of my hopes during the past Easter season was this: during the Holy Thursday Mass, when the presiding priest washes the feet of 12 parishioners (imitating how Jesus washed the feet of the apostles at the Last Supper), bishops could have washed the feet of sexual abuse victims, as a penitential gesture. But even this would be just a "symbolic" presence. A penitent in a confessional is not asked to do something symbolic but something *real*, something *difficult*, something that *costs him or her something*.

What would a real penance look like? What kind of penance would "correspond," to use the *Catechism's* language, with these sins? Priests convicted of sexual abuse are laicized (that is, they have their priesthood taken away and are returned to the lay state) and, when convicted in court, spend time in jail. Those are grave penances (that's why jails were formerly called "penitentiaries") but are undertaken involuntarily. After serving time for their crimes, these offenders, no longer priests, should perform additional penances and spend the rest of their lives praying for their victims.

Decades ago, some bishops considered cases of abuse primarily moral offenses and relied overly on the advice of those psychiatrists and psychologists who recommended placing the offenders back in active ministry. But that misguided trust in the advice of some psychologists may explain placing a man back in ministry only *once*. Those who moved repeat offenders from parish to parish cannot blame this on psychologists. Thus, if those who have sinned expect real forgiveness from those against whom they have sinned, a real penance is "necessary," as Benedict said -- resigning from their posts, caring for the sick in hospitals in the inner city, working in a remote refugee camp, serving in a homeless shelter in a slum, or retiring to a monastery to pray for victims.

My point is not to proscribe individual penances. I don't know who has sinned and who hasn't; I cannot look into someone's soul. (And I'm sure victims would have ideas for even stronger penances.) The point is that the hierarchy, seeking a way toward healing, has a spiritual resource that it overlooks at its peril. And that is the sacrament of reconciliation, instituted at the behest of Jesus Christ himself, and which lies at the heart of Catholic theology. And penance, part of that sacramental model, will help to begin to heal the serious rupture in the church.

But there is a difference in this case: the one who forgives. In the confessional the priest grants absolution in the name of God to the layperson. When it comes to these sins, it is the layperson who must grant absolution to those clergy who are seeking forgiveness.

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