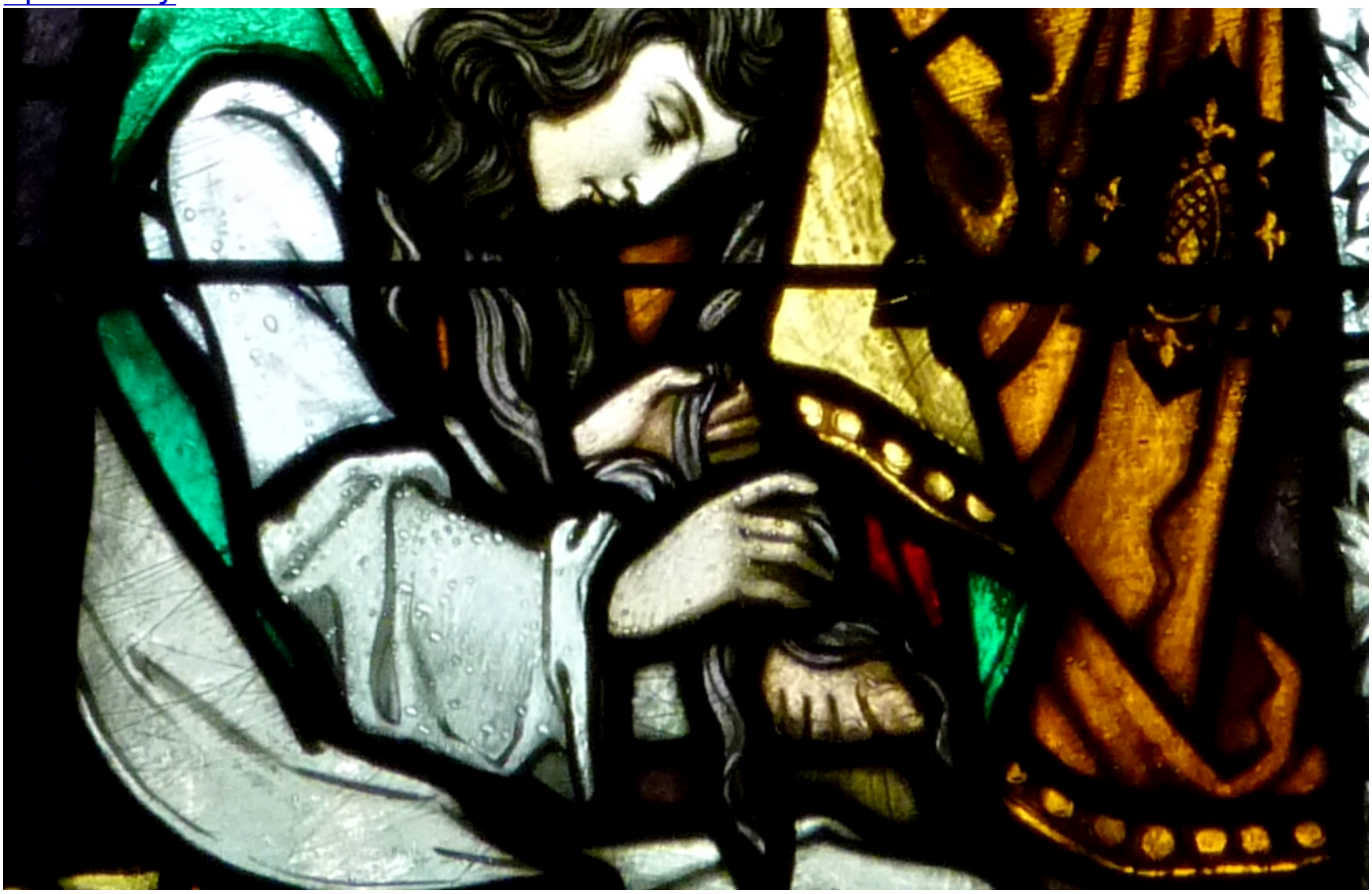
Columns
Ministry
Spirituality



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by Margaret Gonsalves

Contributor

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Recently, some sisters whom I have known since their childhood invited me to attend their final profession. Only after they thanked him did I recognize the bishop, with whom I had collaborated in one of the remote parishes in Gujarat, India. I went forward to hug him, but he pushed me away as if he had been struck by electricity.

I wondered about the reason for his strange behavior, since we were accustomed to exchanging hugs on birthdays and feast days in the parish. Maybe it had something to do with the "untouchability" resulting from the "touchy" sexual scandals in the church.

For the past few years, while working in collaboration with the Lord's Ranch, Pune, to coordinate the Easter triduum liturgy, I initiated an "anointing healing massage." This involves a massage of the head, shoulders and extremities, and sometimes a full body massage to those in need. I donate this as my Lenten sacrifice, for the retreatants during the holy triduum.

I kept hoping to preach on Holy Thursday, but knowing the celebrant was ultraconservative, I held back. But finally this year while preparing the liturgy, I let the celebrant know that I would be preaching on Maundy Thursday, to which the priest replied "Only ordained priests can preach after the Gospel — you can have 'faith sharing' after the Communion service."

I was hesitant to call it "faith sharing" and was resolutely firm on preaching. Finally, the long-awaited day arrived. As liturgy coordinator, I was standing between the altar and the choir. There was silence after the Gospel reading, and the priest said, "Today, Sister Margaret will preach." So, here's what I said on the real Maundy Thursday — with a real congregation — and real preaching!

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"Dear friends, if you are regular Massgoers you might have noticed that on Monday the Gospel reading was about Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus" (John 12:1-11). I told them that for the past five years, I had been offering anointing massage during Easter retreat and occasionally in other retreats, too.

I shared with them some of the testimonies I have received about the experience:

> "For the last many years, I was going through depression. I went for counseling, confession, charismatic retreats, but to no avail. Finally, I decided to come for this personal retreat, where you happened to guide me. Your inputs and anointing massage brought me back to my real jovial nature and I am back to offering help to others."
>
> "I was so afraid of any touch, so till today I didn't dare to think of my marriage. With your anointing massage, you helped me to dream new possibilities, to explore new avenues of my creative potentials. I plan to give up my corporate job and plunge into something that is life-giving to all. If I find a suitable man, I want to get married, too."
>
> "I have committed heinous acts to get money and was contemplating suicide. Now the way you anointed me with massage, I feel new life surging through every fiber of my being. I am so confident to go back to my job, work hard and repay the loans."

I always advise those who want to confess to go to a priest, but some boldly replied like this:

> "I just don't believe in confession. The priests only give the absolution of reciting, 'Hail Mary ... Holy Mary.' I heard from other people that you listened to their struggle compassionately and gave them concrete, constructive, creative and positive approach to penance. I want to forgive myself for what I have done to my wife." (After his personal sharing while I was giving the massage, he said, "Thank you, Sister, you are a great confessor. Your personal touch through listening is more than confession of healing. Now I know the Jesus of compassion and mercy for me.")

The anointing testimonies remind me of the words of Pope Francis: "Christ is alive! He is our hope. ... Everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life"



Baby Kimaya was born weighing 2 pounds but with anointing massage by grandma Leena, she now weighs nearly 18 pounds. (Provided photo)

A year ago, my grandniece Kimaya was born prematurely, weighing only 2.7 pounds. Given no chance of survival, she was brought home after a month in an incubator. My sister, her grandmother, gave her an anointing massage every day, cuddled her with kisses, held her in her bosom almost 18 hours a day and made her sleep on her chest for eight months. Kimaya now weighs 17.63 lbs.

The nonsexual touch of anointing massage increases the production of two neurotransmitters: dopamine and serotonin. These decrease stress hormones, increase feelings of comfort and safety, and boost the immune system — leading to a psychological resurrection.

Anointing massage is not only external — limited to pores and skin — but it demonstrates a responsible presence with a commitment toward the others' growth. Jesus used the intimate expression of touching and allowing himself to be touched, defying religious and cultural taboos surrounding it, to manifest the God of compassion. Jesus dared to break the Hebrew law that forbade touching of lepers as source of defilement (Mark 1:41).

Jesus did not withdraw from the scandalizing touch of a woman in public, despite her reputation as a tarnished sinner (Luke 7:36-50) and allowed the touch of a bleeding woman. (Mark 5:24-34). God restores us, by Jesus' healing and life-giving touch, to wholeness, reconciliation and Shal-Om!

Would it be a stretch of truth to say that Jesus — not afraid to learn from women — experienced reverential human touch when Mary anointed his feet, and so used a similar reverential act before the Last Supper to bless his disciples and prepare them for a life of humble service?

In the massage, oils and tears work as outer and inner healers, evoking feelings of being loved, freeing from the yoke of buried guilt, and awakening new hope for the future. I have heard people say that in the future we may not die of disastrous climate change but from lack of personal and human touch. A pat on the shoulder, a caring hug can go a long way in healing our present crisis of touch phobia.

After the customary feet-washing service on Holy Thursday, we ask participants to massage each other's feet with fragrant oils, pray for one another, and ask pardon; many married couples said they experienced a strengthening of their marital bonds.

Shall we ask St. Mary of Magdala/Bethany to teach us how to give healthy anointing touch in her memory? May she extend her saintly touch toward Pope Francis through the presence of women in the Curia and give a final touch to the reform process in the Catholic Church.

"Lazarus, come out!" was the anointing voice of Jesus, which resulted in one of his most spectacular and poignant miracles — freeing the corpse from his burial fastenings, gifting him with new life.

Pope Francis, please forgive me for going one step ahead by preaching on Holy Thursday. How long must we suppress the anointing voice of women for preaching

the Gospel? We have a saying, "Patience is good for breakfast but bad for supper."

[Margaret Gonsalves belongs to the Sisters for Christian Community, Washington, D.C. She is active in church and theological fora. As founder of ANNNI Charitable Trust, she works to empower indigenous girls and women, offering residential programs in English and sustainable development skills in India.]