

A priest friend of mine used to tongue in cheek opine occasionally, “Jim, I love the church if it just wasn’t for the people!” This is the challenge of this weekend’s readings, translating our professed love of God into love of one another in daily life.

Both the prophet Ezekiel in the first reading and Jesus in the Gospel passage warn us against being “Flip Floppers” when it comes to discipleship—saying one thing, doing something entirely different. There is a more condemnatory term for this—hypocrisy. True, none of us can honestly say that there is no trace of hypocrisy in our lives unless we are an infant or a very small child who has not yet learned the art of it. This is why the brutal forthrightness of a child is so disarming!! To counter any accusation of hypocrisy, St. Paul in today’s second reading exhorts us: “Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5) as he continues quoting an early Christian hymn proclaiming the type of love we are to have: “Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself...to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

Father Ronald Rohlheiser, a weekly columnist in our archdiocesan newspaper *The Witness*, a seminary rector, psychologist and contemporary spiritual writer cites the image of Jesus washing the feet of the apostles at the Last Supper as a way to understand the love of today’s Scriptures call us to. In recounting the events of the Last Supper, Rohlheiser notes, St. John in his Gospel recounts that Jesus stripped off his “outer garment” before washing the apostles’ feet. This physical detail reveals a fundamental truth about us Rohlheiser reflects. All of us have outer garments, not just physical clothing; but also the outer garments of our specific ethnicity and its traditions, language, religious identity, culture, political affiliation, ideology, and set of moral judgments. We all tend to associate ourselves with like-minded people who wear garments just like or similar to ours and just can’t understand (or tolerate) those who are different than us. We go to Mass, but once outside the door, we live (or so we say we must live) in the “real” world. And in the “real world” the teachings of Jesus, while nice ideals, just aren’t practical or possible; or so we claim. In removing his outer garment and stooping to wash the apostles’ feet, Jesus reveals his true inner self—love made flesh. Finishing the ritual he again reclines at table and then says to the apostles, “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn.

13:15). As those baptized into him, he challenges us to, like him, risk stripping ourselves of the many “outward garments” we wear so that the inner garment we profess, love for God may also be seen and expressed in love for neighbor; like Jesus’ own life, one seamless garment of love..

The insert in this weekend’s Bulletin offers us this call on a particular issue. Archbishop, Hanus, in union with all of the bishops of our country, invites us to participate in the “Pray for the DREAM Initiative” in support for the proposed bill presently before Congress known as the DREAM Act. A central objective of the DREAM Act is granting children of persons who came to our country illegally, who had no choice in emigrating, who have known no other homeland, and who have proven themselves to be young adults of good character, an opportunity to earn legal status and become contributing citizens if they serve in the military, the Peace Corps or attend college and then contribute to their community in some form of service, to earn a “green card” and then begin the process of becoming legal citizens.

The issue of immigration and the reform of our nation’s policies and laws provoke a range of emotions and opinions. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the retired archbishop of Washington, D.C. noted in a recent homily, that the just treatment of immigrants is a biblical injunction and so part of our Catholic moral teaching regarding the respect and dignity of human life. In the book of Leviticus the Hebrew people, themselves refugees and immigrants, settle into a homeland. As they do so, Moses enjoins on them a strict command not to oppress an alien because they themselves were once aliens and refugees. In the New Testament, exile and homelessness also mark the life of Jesus. As a child he became with his parents a refugee and alien in Egypt to escape the murderous King Herod. He was an itinerant teacher, having no permanent home. He states strongly in St. Matthew’s gospel: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” and “whatever you did for the least of these, you did to me” (Mt. 25:25,39,40).

We pray today for the grace to take off the garments that separate us, and assume the seamless garment of Jesus; the garment of love—love for God and love for God’s people.