Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Spirituality



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Saturday January 11, 2020

It's 8 o'clock on a Saturday morning, and punctual parishioners are seated in church across the street from the convent. At the curb — right in front of the convent — the "Barking Dog Mass" is about to begin. This special liturgy was fondly named after a guest read aloud, at supper one night, the Billy Collins poem: "Why I Never Keep a Gun in the House." The poem features a barking dog.

The poem captures many of the noblest sentiments aroused in the neighborhood on Saturday mornings when one faithful liturgy attendee parks his pickup in front of the convent, with windows adequately cracked to accommodate the smallish but very devout dog he leaves behind to pray.

I happen to feel that the dog has every right to pray as he chooses. After all, he keeps to himself (or herself) any opinion about how or where we worship our God.

Thanks to Billy's over-the-top generosity toward the annoying dog in his poem, I feel (another reason why I keep poetry in the house) grateful to the barking dog outside my workroom window as he unwittingly supplies a rhythmic bass line for the task I have taken on this morning. I am trying to think about Holy Thursday — in January — 14 weeks away — because someone asked me to. Woof.

Holy Thursday summons a voice in the depths of my being — of an old friend: Beatrice Bruteau, who thought about Holy Thursday most memorably, most transformationally, and shared.

My copy of her book *The Holy Thursday Revolution* is held together with rubber bands and shipping tape. The book has so many page markers it looks organic — as if it were growing tentacles. Indeed, her writings have reached into my cellular

matrix so deep I often wonder who is thinking some of the thoughts in my head.

Over the years, I keep rediscovering her work, and the experience is always, as she says, *Radical* and *Ecstatic* and *Holy*. But it is her description of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples on Holy Thursday that knocks me silly and rearranges my neurons every time.

Foot washing, as celebrated by Beatrice Bruteau, is a very big deal. Woof.

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Her definition of the word "domination" is the word "non-reciprocal." A servant washes a master's feet, both literally and figuratively, and not the other way around. Grrrrr ...

Years ago, when some of us were studying out in California, my friends Mercy Sister Mary Ellen and Dominican Sister Elsie worked on the streets of the Tenderloin in San Francisco. They washed the feet of persons whose homes were crates and cardboard boxes. Mortal bodies need constant care, especially feet, which are as directly connected to Earth as roots.

They described their days to me, the people they met, the touch they so sacredly performed. I understood sacrament and ritual in a whole new way. I shivered, as the vast frontier of ritual Earth-shakingly opened up: What wasn't ritual? What wasn't sacrament, I wondered?

Wasn't just to eat of Earth's gifts ... communion?

Wasn't just to breathe with all creation... holy?

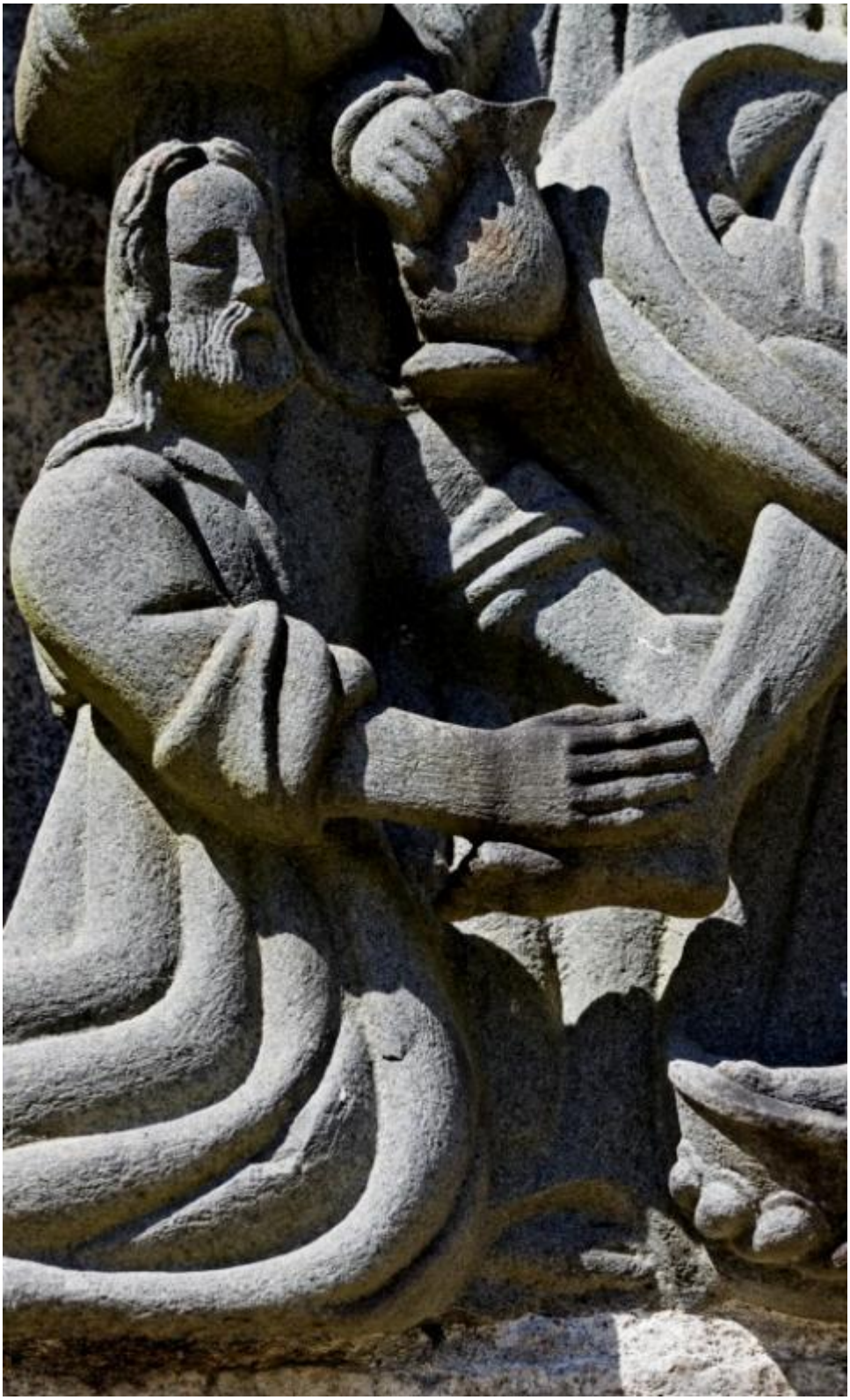
After graduation, Mary Ellen and Elsie stayed on to continue their work on the streets of San Francisco. Before I returned East, I made them a housewarming gift

for their new apartment — a chandelier of white paper butterflies. We hung it from the light fixture in the center of their living room ceiling. We made a ritual — on the altar of Home and Homelessness. Friendship and Moving on. Wonder and Uncertainty. The Generosity of Pure Play. Woof.

Saturday March 21, 2020

Today, the 8 o'clock liturgy has been canceled — likewise the barking dog curbside service has been suspended. And now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, it's hand-washing that is the very big deal, dear Beatrice. We wash our own hands. Over and over. We wash them for each other: ritual — the Resilience of Reciprocity.

Soap and water. Suds — lit from the inside with rainbows. Swish. We all belong to each other.



(Wikimedia Commons / Thesupermat)

On Holy Thursday as Jesus prepared to wash the feet of his disciples, "What was Peter so afraid of?" Beatrice asks.

"Was it that he did see the implications? Did he see that the whole world was being turned upside down? Did he know that if he consented to [his Lord's outrageous action], nothing could ever be anything like the way it had been? (That is if he held true to it.) Did he suddenly get the picture of the Temple crumbling to pieces all around him?"

Temples *are* crumbling all around us. Today the world *is* upside down.

Down with Domination. Grrrrr ... Swish ... slather.

Onward with reciprocity: No atom, cell or life excluded.

In 2012, many women religious traveled to Brazil for the third United Nations Earth Summit. There we ritually signed the "Universal Declaration for the Rights of Mother Earth." I can still feel our proud and hope-filled pen on that document. The ink is still wet.

We all are called to call each other *friend*, as Jesus did, two millennia ago.

Barking dogs included. Woof.

In a universe streamed to us as pure gift ...

Fierce and gentle Mercy, with a towel tied round her waist, kneels to tend the flow.

Welcome to the Holy Thursday Revolution. May we hold true to it.

Thanks for being here.

[Mary Bilderback is a member of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. She has taught biology at Georgian Court University in Lakewood, New Jersey, for more than 25 years with the help of many poems.]