

THIS IS IMPORTANT. PAY ATTENTION.
Homily for Maundy Thursday—Jn 13:1-17, 31b-35
LPC, 4/9/09

Some of you have heard this story, but I'll tell it anyway. During the eight years of my life that God was telling me, "Be a priest," and I was telling God, "No," and later, "Well, maybe, but not yet," I had the very great blessing to be counseled by my priest, whose name was Ellin Deese. Ellin got very sick with cancer about the time that I needed a full-time job, so Ellin got the church to hire me to be her hands and feet in the parish. I visited the sick, led Morning Prayer, preached often, taught catechism, and basically did everything I could do without being ordained. Thus it was that I was invited to my diocese's annual clergy and lay professionals' retreat.

On the eve of leaving for the retreat, I received a phone call from Ellin, who was now quite weak, and whose illness by this time was known to be terminal. "Cynthia," she said, "The time has come to be frank. You need to start the ordination process."

I was somewhat stunned. Like all good pastoral counselors, Ellin had never before tried to influence me directly. I instinctively knew that Ellin was being this uncharacteristically direct because she knew she was dying, and she wanted to make sure she told me this thing that was on her heart before she died. This knowledge alerted me. Something inside me said, "This is important. Pay attention."

These were by no stretch Ellin's last words to me, but they had particular weight for me because we both knew she wasn't going to be around much longer. So I heeded her words. I continued to test my calling to the priesthood, but Ellin's words pushed me over a hump, and there would be no going back.

What I am doing is drawing a parallel between Ellin's words to me on this occasion, and the words of Jesus Christ on the occasion of the Last Supper. Like Ellin, Jesus knew he was going to die: "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father." So Jesus tells (and shows) the disciples something that he wants to make really sure they *get* before he goes. Like the words of Ellin Deese as she was dying, these words have special import and need to be heeded.

There are two parts to Jesus' parting message to the disciples. First, he washes their feet to show them that no act of service and love is beneath them. Second, and this is really just a distillation of the first part, he tells them he is giving them a "new commandment" that they love one another as he has loved them. They know, and we know, that the way Jesus has loved is unreservedly and self-sacrificially.

Little children, if we get nothing else out of the life of Jesus, let us get this. Let us heed this, because this is what Jesus saw as so important that it needed to be said explicitly and demonstrated physically in the last precious hours of his life. Jesus desperately wants us to hear this before he dies. Love one another. Really love one another. This is important. Pay attention. Love one another. *Love one another.*