

Holy Thursday Mandatum

Who may participate in the rite of the washing of feet during the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper?

The *Roman Missal* rubric in the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper, under the title "The Washing of Feet," reads:

"After the Homily, where a pastoral reason suggests it, the Washing of Feet follows. Those who have been chosen from among the people of God are led by the ministers to seats prepared in a suitable place. Then the priest (removing his chasuble if necessary) goes to each one, and, with the help of the ministers, pours water over each one's feet and then dries them" (nos. 10-11).

At the instruction of Pope Francis, the rite of the washing of feet on Holy Thursday has been modified to lawfully permit a wider representation of the People of God to take part in the ceremony. The Holy Father's decision has been made effective by a decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, dated January 6, 2016.

Until 2016, the relevant rubric in the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper in the *Roman Missal* indicated that "The men who have been chosen [*virii selecti*] are led by the ministers to seats prepared in a suitable place." Henceforth that text will read "Those who are chosen from among the people of God are led by the ministers to seats prepared in a suitable place." In the *Ceremonial of Bishops*, this same text is also modified, as well as a rubric describing the items necessary for the Holy Thursday Mass: "seats for the men chosen" is changed to "seats for those chosen."

Pope Francis explained in his decision that he had been reflecting on the foot-washing ritual for some time, and determined that it needed to better reflect "the significance of the gesture Jesus performed in the Upper Room, giving himself 'to the very end' for the salvation of the world, his boundless charity." To that end, he ordered that the rubrics be modified to permit participants for the rite to be chosen "from among all members of the People of God," and likewise insisted that those who are chosen receive an explanation of the meaning of the ceremony.

Carrying out the instruction of the Holy Father, the Congregation's decree provides specific suggestions as to the nature of this representative group: men and women, young and old, healthy and sick, clergy, religious, and laity. The decree echoes the Holy Father's letter by reminding pastors of their duty to help the faithful have a conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the ritual. The modification does not, however, change the fact that the rite is not an obligatory part of that

Mass, but rather is something to be carried out "where a pastoral reason suggests it" (*Roman Missal*, Mass of the Lord's Supper, no. 10).

Together with the [text of the decree](#). . . , the Congregation released a [commentary](#). . . on the rite prepared by its Secretary, Archbishop Arthur Roche. He observed that the liturgical recollection of this moving aspect of the Last Supper has seen a variety of forms in the history of the Roman Rite. It has been part of the liturgy since at least the seventh century, though it tended to be emphasized most in monastic settings. There, it would have naturally been reserved to clerics, and different communities had varying customs regarding the time of day and the location of the ceremony. However, at least from the seventeenth century, there were also customs in some places of washing the feet of the poor on Holy Thursday, and with the Holy Week reforms of Pope Pius XII, it took on a more public role in the evening Mass of that day.

Archbishop Roche's commentary noted that the rite is often referred to as the *Mandatum*, from Jesus' words at the Last Supper (Jn 13:14) and also the first word of one of the antiphons that can be chanted during the ceremony: "Mandatum novum do vobis..." (I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you, says the Lord). Pope Francis clearly desires that this rite signify, in a powerful way, the love we are called to have for one another.

In the United States, the participation of both men and women for the washing of feet ritual has taken place in many communities for a number of years. In February 1987, Bishop Joseph P. Delaney, then-Chairman of the NCCB Committee on the Liturgy, authorized the Secretariat for the Liturgy to respond to the issue of wider participation, especially in the context of the *Roman Missal's* original rubric calling for participation by men only (*virii selecti*).

In its response, the Secretariat wrote that "the intention to emphasize service along with charity in the celebration of the rite is an understandable way of accentuating the evangelical command of the Lord, 'who came to serve and not to be served,' that all members of the Church must serve one another in love. The liturgy is always an act of ecclesial unity and Christian charity, of which the Holy Thursday foot washing rite is an eminent sign. All should obey the Lord's new commandment to love one another *with an abundance of love*, especially at this most sacred time of the liturgical year when the Lord's passion, death, and resurrection are remembered and celebrated in the powerful rites of the Triduum." This original response from 1987 has found new expression in the decision of Pope Francis and its implementation beginning in 2016.

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