

NCCB, Committee for the Liturgy [BCL], 16 February 1987.  
 See – BCL *Newsletter*, February 1987, Volume XXIII, pages 1043 -1044.  
 See – Volume XXXIV, January 1998, pages 1571-1572.

USCCB website, Committee for Divine Worship [BCDW], March 2012:  
<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-resources/triduum/holy-thursday-mandatum.cfm>

USCCB website, CDW, March 2014:  
<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-resources/triduum/holy-thursday-mandatum.cfm>

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## HOLY THURSDAY MANDATUM

**My parish liturgy committee has decided to allow both men and women to take part in the washing of the feet at the liturgy on Holy Thursday. I have always heard that only men may have their feet washed. Which does the Church allow?**

The rubric for Holy Thursday, under the title THE WASHING OF FEET, reads:

"After the Homily, where a pastoral reason suggests it, the Washing of Feet follows. The men who have been chosen (*virī selecti*) 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."

Regarding the phrase *virī selecti*, the Chairman of the then-Committee on the Liturgy, after a review of the matter by the committee, authorized the following response which appeared in the *Newsletter* of February 1987:

**Question:** What is the significance of the Holy Thursday foot washing rite?

**Response:**

1. The Lord Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper as a sign of the new commandment that Christians should love one another: "Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other. This is how all will know you for my disciples: by your love for one another" (see John 13, 34-35). For centuries the Church has imitated the Lord through the ritual enactment of the new commandment of Jesus Christ in the washing of feet on Holy Thursday.
2. Although the practice had fallen into disuse for a long time in parish celebrations, it was restored in 1955 by Pope Pius XII as a part of the general reform of Holy Week. At that time the traditional significance of the rite of foot washing was stated by the Sacred Congregation of Rites in the following words: "Where the washing of feet, to show the Lord's commandment about fraternal charity, is performed in a Church according to the rubrics of the restored Ordo of Holy Week, the faithful should

be instructed on the profound meaning of this sacred rite and should be taught that it is only proper that they should abound in works of Christian charity on this day."<sup>1</sup>

3. The principal and traditional meaning of the Holy Thursday *mandatum*, as underscored by the decree of the Congregation, is the biblical injunction of Christian charity: Christ's disciples are to love one another. For this reason, the priest who presides at the Holy Thursday liturgy portrays the biblical scene of the gospel by washing the feet of some of the faithful.
4. Because the gospel of the *mandatum* read on Holy Thursday also depicts Jesus as the "Teacher and Lord" who humbly serves his disciples by performing this extraordinary gesture which goes beyond the laws of hospitality,<sup>2</sup> the element of humble service has accentuated the celebration of the foot washing rite in the United States over the last decade or more. In this regard, it has become customary in many places to invite both men and women to be participants in this rite in recognition of the service that should be given by all the faithful to the Church and to the world. Thus, in the United States, a variation in the rite developed in which not only charity is signified but also humble service.
5. While this variation may differ from the rubric of the Sacramentary which mentions only men ("viri selecti"), it may nevertheless be said 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.
6. 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.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

1. Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction on the Correct Use of the Restored Ordo of Holy Week, November 16, 1955 (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference Publications Office, 1955), page 6.
2. In biblical times it was prescribed that the host of a banquet was to provide water (and a basin) so that his guests could wash their hands before sitting down to table. Although a host might also provide water for travelers to wash their own feet before entering the house, the host himself would not wash the feet of his guests. According to the Talmud the washing of feet was forbidden to any Jew except those in slavery.

In the controversies between Hillel and Shammai (cf. Shabbat 14a-b) Shammai ruled that guests were to wash their hands to correct "tumat yadayim" or "impurity of hands" (cf. Ex 30, 17 and Lv 15, 11). Priests were always to wash their hands before eating consecrated meals. The Pharisees held that all meals were in a certain sense "consecrated" because of table fellowship.

Jesus' action of washing the feet of his disciples was unusual for his gesture went beyond the required laws of hospitality (washing of hands) to what was, in appearance, a menial task. The Lord's action was probably unrelated to matters of ritual purity according to the Law.

3. For a brief overview of the restoration of the foot washing rite in 1955, see W. J. O'Shea, "Mandatum," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume IX, 146, and W. J. O'Shea, "Holy Thursday," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume VII, 105-107; Walter D. Miller, *Revised Ceremonial of Holy Week* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1971), p. 43. See also Prosper Gueranger, OSB, *The Liturgical Year*, Volume VI, *Passiontide and Holy Week* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1949), pp. 395-401. For the historical background of the many forms of this rite, see the following studies: Pier Franco Beatrice, *La lavanda dei piedi: Contributo alla storia delle antiche liturgie cristiane* (Rome: C.L.V. Edizioni Liturgiche, 1983); "Lotio pedum" in Hermann Schmidt, *Hebdomada Sancta*, Volume II (Rome: Herder, 1956-1957); Annibale Bugnini, CM, and C. Braga, CM, *Ordo Hebdomadae Sanctae Instauratus in Bibliotheca "Ephemerides Liturgicae" Sectio Historica 25* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1956), pp. 73-75; Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy: An Account and Some Reflections*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 81.

This is the latest statement of this Secretariat on the question. No subsequent legislation or instructions have necessitated a modification in the statement.