



**PASTORAL GUIDANCE FOR THE  
READJUSTED RUBRIC IN THE *ROMAN MISSAL* FOR THE WASHING OF FEET**

**OFFICE FOR DIVINE WORSHIP  
ARCHDIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA  
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**BACKGROUND**

The washing of feet, in imitation of the Lord on the night before he died, has a very long and remarkable history. Through the centuries, this practice did not take place in the context of the Sacred Liturgy. Rather, in the tradition, it often occurred in monasteries of monks and nuns as a devotional practice. There is also evidence that the Elect had their feet washed in anticipation of their Easter Vigil Baptism. Popes and Bishops during different periods, on occasion, carried out the washing of feet in a non-liturgical setting. The *Roman Missal* (1570) that followed the Council of Trent called for the washing of feet when convenient. The liturgical reform of Holy Week in 1955 (*Maxima Redemptionis nostrae mysteria*, November 30, 1955) called for the washing of feet of twelve men during the Mass of the Lord's Supper, after the reading of the Gospel of John, if opportune, to show the humility and charity of Christ to his chosen Twelve. The editions of the *Roman Missal* that have followed the Second Vatican Council, including the most recent 2000/2008 third edition, continued with the 1955 provision for selected men (*virii selecti*) to have their feet washed during the Mass of the Lord's Supper, but without specifying a number.

In the United States, even with the introduction of the *Roman Missals* following the Second Vatican Council, and the rubric that only selected men have their feet washed, the practice in many places for many years has been to have both men and women participate in this rite. In fact, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in 1987, in light of the developing practice of both men and women having their feet washed, acknowledged the legitimacy of an inclusive interpretation of "selected men" so that the more eminent sign of Christian charity among all disciples might be more fully expressed on Holy Thursday.

## **READJUSTED RUBRIC TO THE ROMAN MISSAL**

On January 6, 2016, Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, issued a decree in response to a request of Pope Francis to vary the existing rubric found in the current *Roman Missal*. This rubric for the washing of feet, “The men who have been chosen are led by the ministers...,” is now changed to read, “Those who are chosen from amongst the people of God are led by the ministers...” According to the above mentioned decree, “pastors may select a small group of the faithful to represent the variety and unity of each part of the people of God. Such small groups can be made up of men and women, and it is appropriate that they consist of people young and old, healthy and sick, clerics, consecrated men and women and laity.” Those chosen should offer themselves freely. Sound instruction on the meaning of the washing of feet should be provided for the full participation of all.

### **FULLER MEANING**

The washing of feet on Holy Thursday, especially following the reading of John’s Gospel with its vivid description of this scene, is a many-layered sacramental gesture. One of the meanings of the sign is the example that Jesus gives to his own disciples, the Twelve, to offer themselves in sacrificing service, an offering expected of them especially as sharers in his unique Priesthood. Another meaning, and one emphasized by the adjusted rubric, is the example of Jesus himself in offering his life in “limitless charity” for the salvation of all. No one is excluded from the saving love of Christ which becomes the new Commandment of the Teacher for all of us. Following the example of the One who has loved us, all followers are bound to love one another without distinction or exception.

### **PASTORAL PRACTICE**

The washing of feet may be included wherever the Mass of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. However, it is not obligatory. If pastoral considerations suggest it, then it should be carefully carried out to reflect the example and commandment of Christ and not be seen as the central action of the Mass. The washing of feet cannot be substituted with the washing of hands or any other gesture.

The rite is to be carried out by bishops and priests only, in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, who are in imitation of Christ the Priest. Deacons and others may assist with what is needed for the washing of the feet but do not wash feet.

The proposed chants in the *Roman Missal* for the washing of feet should be considered seriously for use. If they are not used, then their texts ought to inspire the choice for appropriate alternatives. The provided chants in the *Roman Missal*, though, speak explicitly to the example of the Lord and his new commandment, the *Mandatum*, to love one another as he has loved us.