

WHY DO WE WASH MALE FEET ON HOLY THURSDAY?

All priests are expected to follow the ritual books whenever they celebrate any of the Sacraments, since these have been given to the Church by Jesus the Lord and belong to Him – they are his actions among us for the purpose of our salvation, the good of souls, the building up of the Church, and the spread of the Good News. These rituals don't belong to us; we are not at liberty to do with them what we will. The ritual book for the Holy Eucharist, also called the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, is the Sacramentary. It has instructions for every day of the year, and this includes Holy Thursday and the washing of the feet of 12 men. Here is a response to a parishioner's questions.

1. Excuse the ignorance but what exactly is the Sacramentary?

The Sacramentary is the altar Mass book, which is the authorized ritual for the sacrament, which is the Holy Eucharist. We don't make it up as we go along, and if we do, we have no authority from God to do that - Jesus gave his authority over his work to Peter and the apostles, now succeeded by the Pope and Bishops. They have authority to amend the rituals and how we may do them, what is the range of latitude we have for adaptation to particular circumstances and times. We cannot adapt it so far that we take the ritual away from what it's established purpose is - both in general and in particular for special feasts.

2. ".....12 apostles": does the bible really say 12 apostles? or disciples?

What do you find there?

3. ".....(and if so it is ONLY to illustrate the Gospel in which Jesus washed the feet of his then 12 men are to be chosen.....)": what's this?

Holy Thursday is the night Jesus instituted two sacraments: the Holy Eucharist, and Holy Orders, without which there can be no Eucharist.

4. "Holy Thursday has its own purpose for being," : So what is the purpose of Holy Thursday? I thought Jesus was teaching us to be servants, that none of us is better than the other, that we are all brothers & sisters, just as the mother with 5 starving children is Fania is my sister, just as the pope is my brother.....That's why we wash EACH OTHERS' feet. No?????

Of course. We live this out every day of the year - that's 365 times a year, for those who go to daily Mass, and all our waking hours that we live in our daily lives everywhere we go and live and act. We also give expression to this as Jesus' command and respond to Him in a ritual way at every Holy Eucharist - especially the Sunday Eucharist, which is the action of Jesus Himself - as He changes us to make us more and more truly children of God and his disciples and stewards; providing we cooperate with his Holy Spirit at work in us, not just at Mass, but also in life.

We didn't need Holy Thursday for that, we have it every Sunday as the significance of who we are called to be and accept to live out. Holy Thursday is about Jesus making a very deliberate decision to set up his succession for the purpose of establishing his Church on earth for the future. It was not an open invitation. All the other disciples were at home celebrating Passover with their own families and occasional visitors and friends who had nowhere else to celebrate it.

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Jesus got his apostles to set up the Passover meal, which He specifically wanted to celebrate with his chosen 12 leaders and missionary pastors in training. It is their feet He washed, to teach them to serve and love one another as He had done for them; so that they could go out and bring this new way of life - by way of teaching and example - to all the other disciples and even to the ends of the earth.

Holy Thursday is first and foremost about all of that, and to it is related the Chrism Mass, which was separated from Holy Thursday because it was just too much to do it all at the same Mass. At the Chrism Mass, the bishops, priests, and deacons - the 3 orders of Holy Orders - renew their sacramental promises of ordination. The people are asked to support all those in Holy Orders by their love and prayers. Then the Archbishop blesses the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of Catechumens, and consecrates the Holy Chrism, which is used for Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and the consecration of altars and churches.

5. ".....in our culture, we are so obsessed with our own needs and views that we want to remake everything into our own image and to suit our own sensibilities;.....": I am not obsessed....., I am not trying to remake anything. I would like to see Mary & the other women present at the Washing of the Feet to be recognized as disciples of Jesus, as well, the women of the church today. We all know that the church would be non-existent if it were not for the work of its women. Sorry! I'm falling asleep. Will continue tomorrow. Feel free to reply.

I meant no personal attack. Please understand that in this day and culture, as a priest I have been unceasingly confronted - not always as politely and lovingly as you are doing - by people, usually women, who keep wanting to turn Holy Thursday into a battle ground for women' rights and equality, and so on. Naturally, that confrontational approach immediately puts me into a defensive position; as though I'm the one who just doesn't get it and should get with the program or catch up to the culture and the times.

At no time in these past two thousand years have any Christian churches, who have been churches since apostolic times, understood that the women disciples were at the table with Jesus and his 12 apostles. In the Gospel, when Jesus chooses what He called his apostles, He chose 12 men from among all the disciples who had begun following him since He first went public. He had a special role in mind for them.

Jesus himself never excluded women from his entourage and from sharing in his gatherings. Luke even refers to the women who went around with Jesus and his 12 apostles and who ministered to them out of their own resources. However, at no time has this ever been interpreted in such a way as to extend to women the very specific role of apostle. It is Jesus himself who excluded women in general from the role of apostle; so shall we accuse Jesus of misogyny? I don't think so.

It is quite plausible that there were women in the background helping with the cooking and preparation of the Passover meal Jesus had with his apostles at what we now call the Last Supper, and they were content to be there in that way. They had no need to demand a different role or status from Jesus. Until this century, women in the church continued to see their place and role as a supportive one, which has often included positions of leadership and initiative - such as in religious orders and missionary work in the past - and such as various ministries and roles as in the Roman congregations and diocesan curias and parishes today.

So you see, the fault, if there is one, is not with 2000 years of commemorating on Holy Thursday Jesus' institution of the Holy Eucharist and Holy Orders; rather it is with anyone now deciding that we

should mask the purpose of this tradition and ritual in order to make of it something else - as valid and legitimate as it may be. There are plenty of opportunities for us to do affirmative action for the presence, dignity, and role of women without trying to remake the Mass, the priesthood, or the Holy Thursday liturgy.

I don't know if these comments have satisfactorily addressed the issues and questions you associate with the manner in which we have received this ritual in accord with how it has been celebrated for all these centuries. But I hope I have clearly made the point that, as a priest who has solemnly promised at my ordination to receive, celebrate, and pass on AS I HAVE RECEIVED THEM AND AS THE CHURCH HAS CELEBRATED THEM the Sacraments and other Rituals of our faith; I am not at liberty to tamper with or change them beyond their intended purposes.

And any priest who has ever done it - and sadly I must admit to doing so myself as a young priest when I wasn't strong enough to resist all the pressure that was brought to bear on me to do the ritual differently - or currently celebrates this ritual differently than what is indicated in the Sacramentary is doing so in violation of both the ritual and of his own ordination promises. I will never do that again, for any consideration. This also applies to all the other sacraments and rituals as officially laid down by those who have been given authority to do so by the Lord. Being obedient to lawful authority is a distinguishing feature of our faith and identity as Roman Catholic Christians, and I'm very happy now and at peace with being a member of our Church and Tradition.

Response to a Parishioner – April 1st, 2004

You are exploring the possibility of somehow including women in the Holy Thursday washing of the feet, as well as a representation that the washing did not end with the apostles, but only began with them and went on among all the disciples into all the areas of life and faith and Christian community. I basically agree with everything you've written, with the exception about modifying the liturgy. Until Vatican II, Catholics all understood that they were called to live out the Gospel in their own daily lives, and that when they came to Liturgy, they were coming to hear the Lord speak to them about their living out of the Gospel. They had no need to see themselves represented up in the sanctuary in any way differently than what was already happening in the liturgy. They already felt the connection and went home uplifted and encouraged and sanctified. The sanctuary represented heaven, and the body of the church represented the earth. The communion rail represented the meeting point of the life-giving encounter with God in Jesus, most especially in Holy Communion.

At present, we who live in our ever-shifting contemporary culture, find ourselves less securely anchored and more insecure in the face of life, of our faith, of our place in the world before God and of our place in the life and work of the Church. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that there is a kind of "turf war" going on in the midst of the whole complex network of relations among Catholic Christians, between clergy and laity, between priests and bishops and laity and bishops, all dancing around the fundamental issue of authority. Where can we find Jesus present in the exercise of authority in a broad range of matters, and how and when does Jesus share his own authority, and is Jesus calling laity in general and women in particular to participate in that authority and if so, how?

In fact, I think the real discussion about authority should bear on knowing the will of the Father for us in all the particulars of living in the world but not of it, and of our call to give witness to the Gospel and to Jesus and our faith in Him as the One Saviour of the world. Consequently, it is my belief that the discussion we should be having about the Father's will and Jesus' authority - which

should bear on our life in the world - is being diverted to issues in the church sanctuary. We are only diverting the discussion from where it should be focusing. We need to continue to explore how we are to help each other find our place and vocation in the life and ministry of the Church.

As for the question you raise about the Holy Thursday ritual, I believe that is the fundamental reason why, for example, year after year there are a few parishioners who - like yourself - try to find a way in dialogue with their pastors to see women visibly included in this particular ritual of the washing of the feet, all the more reason because it has been done in the past, and I don't believe more enthusiastically by any priest than by Fr. Mike Shaw, who continues to live in the parish and whose influence continues to be felt and will continue to be felt long after I am gone and forgotten.

What is really at issue here, I believe, is our willingness to receive what the Lord is offering us and to receive it in the way He himself chooses to offer it to us. How can we know the way the Lord wants to offer the liturgy to us? He entrusted his own authority to the Apostles and their successors; so, if the Sacrament of Holy Orders is to continue to mean anything, then we need to remain open to the bishops - led by the Pope and his duly appointed assistants in the various congregations, such as the one for rituals - to be the ones to assure that we continue to receive and celebrate the sacraments and liturgies on Sundays, Holy Days, and weekdays as they have been handed on to us. It's a question of fidelity and loyalty, and fundamentally of humility and obedience.

I honestly feel sympathy for your request and the feelings of parishioners. However, as long as we keep talking about changing the way we celebrate these ritual moments of encounter with Jesus our Risen Lord - and want or ask our priests to ignore the very clear instructions given in the ritual books themselves; then we are skirting the real issues. I personally need to ask the Lord to forgive me for the times I have taken liberties with the rituals, and to forgive all his priests who have done so or continue to do so.

At our ordination, we promised "to discharge without fail the office of priesthood in the presbyteral order as a conscientious fellow worker with the bishops in caring for the Lord's flock... **to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us** for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people... to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely, preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith... and to consecrate my life to God for the salvation of his people, and to unite myself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice... (and to) respect and obey the bishop and his successors."

As priests and even bishops we have no authority of our own to modify the ritual, which calls for twelve men to represent the 12 apostles if the washing is done. The fact that some priests and even some bishops may or have taken such liberties does not make it right. Any expectations, needs, feelings, desires, demands, or requests by the faithful to the contrary are mistaken - they are misunderstanding the fundamental reason for existing of these rituals in the first place.

The number one reason why we have Mass on Holy Thursday is to remember and give thanks to God for giving us in Jesus a New High Priest administering to us his New People in faith a New Sacrifice which is an everlasting sacrifice that gives us life as adopted children of his Eternal Father, and for giving us through Jesus a New Priesthood for continuing to make present in every generation this new and Eternal Sacrifice Jesus made once and for all of his own life for the forgiveness of sins and for the life and transformation of the world. Any other use of the ritual of the Holy Thursday celebration of the Lord's Supper is a **misuse** and a lack of respect and reverence for **what the lord jesus is himself intending to do in the course of the ritual itself.**