



(Pope Francis performing the rite of the washing of feet at a Holy Thursday Mass officiated at the Rebibbia prison in Rome on April 2, 2015. (Credit: L'Osservatore Romano))

(Vatican City, January 21, 2016 / 10:14 a.m. (Catholic News Agency)) Pope Francis has changed the norms for the Church's traditional foot-washing ceremony [of the right foot] on Holy Thursday, issuing a decree permitting women [and children] to participate in what had been a ritual officially reserved only to men.

In a letter addressed to Cardinal Robert Sarah, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Pope said that from now on the 12 persons chosen to participate in the ritual of the washing of the feet will be selected "from among all members of the [baptized] People of God."

"For some time I have been reflecting on the rite of the washing of the feet, which forms part of the Liturgy of the Mass of the Lord's Supper, with the intention of improving the ways in which it is put into practice, so that we fully express the meaning of the gesture made by Jesus in the Upper Room, his gift of self until the end for the salvation of the world, his boundless charity", said Pope Francis. He also stressed that "an adequate explanation of the meaning of the rite itself" ought to be provided for those chosen to participate.

The official decree was signed by Cardinal Sarah January 6, 2016. In it, the Cardinal specified that the previous text of the Roman Missal, which says that "the men chosen are accompanied by the ministers," has now been changed to read "those chosen from among the People of God are accompanied by the ministers."

Pastors may freely choose a group of faithful “that represents the variety and unity of every part of the people of God,” he said, explaining that this group may now consist of “men and women, and suitably of young and elderly, healthy and sick, clerics, consecrated and laity.”

Many parishes around the world had already been including women in the ritual for years; the decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship makes the practice valid [throughout the world].

Francis himself had a habit of including women and non-Catholics in the ritual during his own Holy Thursday liturgies, which have taken place in both juvenile and adult detention centers and a center for the elderly and disabled.

Just after his election as the Bishop of Rome in 2013, Pope Francis offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at Rome’s Casal del Marmo juvenile detention center, where he washed the feet of 12 youth, including two women and two Muslims.

A year later, he presided over the Holy Thursday Mass at the Don Gnocchi center for the elderly and disabled, where he washed the feet of both young people and elderly, four of whom were women.

So when reading the decree’s emphasis on the “People of God,” Archbishop Arthur Roche, Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship said the phrase can be interpreted from its use in *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution on the Church, in which the term refers “specifically to the Church” [i.e., the Christian baptized].

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