

Circular on Maundy Thursday Washing of the Feet

To: All Member Bishops

Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India

Your Eminence / Grace / Excellency,

On the first Maundy Thursday service after his election as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis washed the feet of several inmates at one of Rome's prisons. There was great wonderment because among those whose feet he washed were some girls and some not belonging to the Catholic faith. Although the Vatican Spokesman, Fr. Federico Lombardi, said that this was not to be taken as a changing the discipline of the Church, it is now clear that the Holy Father was giving a message.

After some reflection, Pope Francis has given directions to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to issue a Decree, *In Missa In Cena Domini*, making some changes in the regulations for the Washing of the Feet. The Instructions makes the following changes:

1. The previous Document prescribed that the feet of 12 men be washed. Now this is changed to "people of God." Hence, the prescription to wash only the feet of men no longer holds. Women too could be part of the group whose feet are washed.
2. Earlier the number of people whose feet were to be washed was specified as 12 (12 men). In the new Decree, the number is not specified. It simply says "the pastor may select a small group of the faithful."
3. The Instruction gives an example of those who could form part of the group, "men and women, and it is appropriate that they consist of people young and the old, healthy and sick, clerics, consecrated persons and lay people". Evidently the group, both the number and composition, would vary from parish to parish. For example, in some parishes there may not be clerics available to form part of the group. So one should not go out of the way to make sure that each of these categories are part of the group.

4. The Decree states that the group will “represent the variety and unity of each part of the people of God.” Again, each of our parishes could have a different composition and this should be kept in mind when choosing the members of the group.

While the number 12 which was earlier specified is no longer prescriptive, I do think this was a logistically convenient number and we must keep this in mind. Having too big a number would disturb the service and on the other hand, having too small a number might not give the Washing of the Feet its adequate significance.

In the Archdiocese of Bombay I have made the following suggestion to our Priests “Although this is not mentioned in the Decree, I would recommend that some poor / underprivileged / disadvantaged people also form part of the group. This will bring out more clearly the meaning of Our Lord’s action of humility and charity in the Washing of the Feet.” Each Diocesan Bishop might want to make some suggestion to the priests, according to the local context.

If you foresee some difficulty or resistance to the change, you could consider whether discussing this matter with your Parish Pastoral Council and getting their assistance in deciding the composition of the group might help.

Finally the Decree also asks that both those whose feet are washed as well as the others are instructed about the service. We usually do this in the homily. This year’s change might be good opportunity to explain the message more in detail.

Wishing you a very holy Triduum in preparation for a Happy Easter and with kind regards and best wishes,

Yours fraternally in Christ,

Oswald Cardinal Gracias

Archbishop of Bombay &

President, Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India

9 March 2016