

## Liturgy and Life – Spring 2019 – Holy Week & More – Part II – Mandatum

A while back, we celebrated Holy Week, the liturgical highlight of the Church's liturgical calendar. I did have some questions regarding what is called the "Triduum" (Latin for "three days" –the celebration of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil).

On Holy Thursday we celebrate Our Lord giving us for the first time the priesthood and the holy Mass; on Good Friday, we celebrate the Passion (Suffering) of Our Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sins; at Easter Vigil we stay up into the middle of the night, anticipating the greatest mystery of Our Faith: Our Lord rising from the grave, conquering sin and death.

I had some questions about Holy Thursday, especially the "washing of the feet." Sometimes you will hear this called by the liturgical handle, *mandatum*. That's the Latin word for *commandment*, because the Gospel has Jesus telling His Apostles, as He washes their feet, "I give you a new *commandment*: Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13).

Why didn't I do that this past Holy Thursday? Lots of reasons. First off, it is only an option for that Mass, not a required element. The instruction in the missal basically says that the pastor can decide to include it if there is a good pastoral reason. The custom is not deeply rooted in parish Masses. It was more a monastic tradition, for example, for an abbot to wash the feet of his monks, or for a bishop to wash his priests' feet.

My "sources" tell me that a lot of people didn't like it. In fact, some skipped the Mass because of it. I can certainly understand that, because washing other people's feet is generally considered strange in our American culture, if not something extremely intimate. In the days when Our Lord walked the earth, it was what a servant would do for His master. As people walked on dirty dusty roads (no cars of course) often with sandals or even barefoot, there was a practical need for the servant to do this. Even then, it was considered a menial or demeaning task, and that is the point: Jesus was – shockingly enough to St. Peter and the Apostles – showing them that He, their Lord, was not afraid to (as we would say) "get his hands dirty" in humbling Himself and lowering Himself to serve mankind: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve – and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mt. 20:28) So Jesus is revealing to them how they, His first priests, must also humble themselves to serve the faithful.

On top of this, though, there has been a great deal of confusion and controversy about it in the U.S. Because it was so closely connected to the priesthood itself, the Church had for centuries prohibited women from receiving the washing. Many U.S. Bishops (disappointingly in my opinion) simply looked the other way when many priests disobeyed the Church because of feminist pressure to "be included." Pope Francis very recently changed this instruction. Many parishes have the people, not the priest, washing each other. That's never been part of our tradition and is still in violation of the rubrics. Rather than wade into the confusion, I thought it best simply not to exercise the (distracting) option. More important to focus on honoring Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. More on the meaning of that Eucharistic procession soon.