

THE FOOTWASHING

Q: May women have their feet washed on Holy Thursday?

A: The first question that often arises is whether or not it is permissible for women to have their feet washed. While the literal Latin of the rubrics concerning the footwashing states that the priest is to wash the feet of men (*vir*i; no number is specified) in this optional rite, it is also true that the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy has stated that the practice of washing women's feet is pastorally appropriate. And, in response to Boston Archbishop O'Malley's direct inquiry on the matter, the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship has "provided for a 'pastoral decision' to include women" in the rite (*Ministry and Liturgy* 32:7 Sept. 2005 p. 21). In other words, it is allowed to wash the feet of woman on Holy Thursday.

Q: May we substitute the washing of feet with the washing of hands?

A: The answer is no. The Footwashing enjoys a 2000-year history in our tradition. In some places, such as Milan, it even achieved quasi-sacramental status. For symbols, or metaphors, to "work," they have to have a clear point of reference. On Holy Thursday, the Johannine account of Jesus' actions at the Last Supper is proclaimed: that is the referent for the ritual action that follows. The connection is clear: the ritual action serves as a reminder and encouragement to follow the example of Jesus' selfless service. The fact that we may be "squeamish" about washing feet (or having our feet washed) is indeed a good thing: self-emptying service in fidelity to Jesus *is* uncomfortable, challenging, and messy. In our language, "washing feet" is a well-understood metaphor for serving others while "washing ones hands" of something means to avoid responsibility or involvement. Which action honors what the scriptural account and the Church's liturgy want to proclaim?