

Vatican defends Pope Francis' washing of women's feet

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican on Friday (March 29) dismissed criticism of Pope Francis' decision to wash the feet of two women during a Maundy Thursday Mass at a Rome youth prison.

The move has come under fire from Catholic traditionalists who say that the rite is a re-enactment of Jesus washing the feet of the 12 apostles before his death, and thus should be limited only to men.

Traditionally, popes have washed the feet of 12 priests during a solemn Mass in Rome's St. John Lateran Basilica.

Edward Peters, a blogger and expert in church law at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, wrote on his blog that Francis was setting a "questionable example." A 1988 letter from the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship states that only "chosen men" can be admitted to the foot-washing ceremony.

But including women in the rite is a widespread practice in the United States and elsewhere. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio regularly included women in the rite.

The Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said the pope's decision was "absolutely licit" for a rite that is not a church sacrament. Francis also took into account "the real situation, the community where one celebrates," Lombardi added.

The Casal del Marmo prison where Francis celebrated houses both young men and women, "and it would have been strange if girls had been excluded," Lombardi said.

"This community understands simple and essential things; they were not liturgy scholars," Lombardi said. "Washing feet was important to present the Lord's spirit of service and love."

A document issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says that the inclusion of women in the foot-washing rite is an "understandable way of accentuating the evangelical command of the Lord, 'who came to serve and not to be served,' that all members of the church must serve one another in love."

The bishops' document continues, "It has become customary in many places to invite both men and women to be participants in this rite in recognition of the service that should be given by all the faithful to the church and to the world."

Since his election on March 13, Francis has shown a preference for a simple, humble approach to the papacy. He's scaled back the elaborate rites and liturgical vestments his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, had reintroduced.

The moves have worried some conservatives.

The Rev. John Zuhlsdorf, a conservative blogger, said that Francis' moves might be interpreted as a vindication of Catholic liberals that have been increasingly marginalized during the conservative papacies of Benedict and John Paul II.

"Liberals will find it far easier than conservatives to claim that Francis' actions are endorsements of their liberal thing," he wrote on his blog on March 28.

The inclusion of women in the Maundy Thursday rite, for example, could raise hopes that Francis will endorse women priests, Zuhlsdorf wrote. "Liberals," he said, "only care about the washing of the feet of women, because ultimately they want women to do the washing."

But Bergoglio wrote in a 2011 book that women cannot accede to the priesthood because "the maximum of the priesthood is Jesus, a male."

"According to tradition," wrote the future pope, "all that pertains to the priesthood must happen through man."