"If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:14)

Every Holy Thursday, the Pope kneels before twelve people and performs one of the most moving—and controversial—acts of Catholic liturgy: the *Mandatum*, the washing of feet. A gesture that has evolved, sparked debates, and carries a message as radical today as it was two thousand years ago.

Why does he do it? What does it mean when the Church includes women, non-Christians, or even prisoners? Is it just a symbol, or a silent revolution? Let's dive into the heart of this mystery.

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1. The Biblical Origin: The Night That Changed Everything

It all begins in the Upper Room, hours before the crucifixion. Jesus, aware of His impending death, does something astonishing:

- **The Master becomes a servant**: In Jewish culture, washing feet was a task for slaves. The disciples must have been stunned to see their Rabbi kneel before them—including Judas, His future betrayer (John 13:1-17).
- **An explicit command**: *"I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."* (John 13:15). This is not optional; it's a Christian imperative.

Theologically, this act encapsulates Christ's entire mission: *"The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve."* (Mark 10:45). It's a *sacrament in action*—service as the essence of God's Kingdom.

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2. The History of the *Mandatum*: From Monasteries to the Vatican

The washing of feet wasn't always a public ceremony. Its evolution is fascinating:

- **4th Century**: Documented in monasteries, where abbots washed the feet of monks, imitating Christ.
- **Middle Ages**: Christian kings (like St. Louis IX of France) practiced it as a sign of humility. The Church formally incorporated it into Holy Thursday liturgy.

- **Before Vatican II**: Only Catholic men participated, symbolizing the "12 apostles." But everything would change...

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3. Francis' Revolution: Women, Muslims, and Prisoners

Since 2013, Pope Francis has transformed this gesture into a *sign of the times*:

- **2013**: He washes the feet of young detainees, including two women and a Muslim. Scandal for some, pure Gospel for others.
- **2014-2024**: He repeats the act in prisons, refugee centers, and with the disabled... Breaking protocol to prioritize *message over ritual*.

Is this valid? Yes. The Code of Canon Law (canon 861) no longer restricts the rite to men. Francis emphasizes: *"Service has no borders."*

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4. The Deep Meaning: More Than Water and Towels

This act is an *anti-protocol* in a world obsessed with power:

- **Radical humility**: The Pope, Christ's vicar, lowers himself to the level of the marginalized—a *judgment against ecclesiastical pride*.
- **Divine inclusion**: By washing the feet of non-Christians, the Church declares: *"God serves everyone, not just the 'pure.'"*
- **A call to action**: This isn't just liturgical drama. How do *we* wash the feet of our family, migrants, those who've hurt us?

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5. Criticism and Controversy: Betrayal or Fidelity to the Gospel?

Some traditionalists argue:

- *"It should be 12 Catholic men, like the apostles."*
- *"The sacredness is being lost."*

But theology responds:

- Jesus didn't choose the Twelve during the foot-washing—He chose *needy humans* (including Judas!).
- The spirit of the law (service) outweighs the letter (ritual). As Francis says: *"I prefer a Church that's bruised from serving to one that's sick from self-absorption."*

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6. How to Live the *Mandatum* Today: 3 Concrete Actions

1. **Serve without calculation**: At work, home, or online. Do you *talk* about the poor, or *touch* their feet?
2. **Let others serve you**: Humility also means accepting help. Do you allow others to "wash your feet"?
3. **Break barriers**: Like Francis, seek out those the world excludes—a Muslim, a sinner, a political opponent… Christ is there.

Conclusion: A Gesture That Challenges the World's Power Structures

The washing of feet isn't folklore. It's a *subversive act* in an age of selfishness and division. Every time the Pope includes a refugee or a woman, he reminds us: *God is not an exclusive club.*

Jesus didn't say *"understand this,"* but *"do this."* The question isn't whether the ritual is perfect, but: **Whose feet are you washing today?**

"At the end of life, we will not be judged by our rituals, but by our love." (St. Teresa of Calcutta).

Did this article challenge you? Share it and start your *service revolution*. The world needs more Christians on their knees, washing feet!