

Pope Francis washes feet of young inmates on Holy Thursday 2023

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Pope Francis washed the feet of 12 young men and women, inmates at a juvenile prison in Rome, during a Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday.

Pope Francis washes and kisses the feet of 12 young men and women, inmates at Casal del Marmo juvenile detention center on Rome's outskirts, during a Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday, April 6, 2023. (Credit: Vatican Media)

The pope presided over the livestreamed Mass for more than 80 inmates, family, staff, and guards in the chapel of the Casal del Marmo juvenile detention center on Rome's outskirts on April 6.

In an off-the-cuff homily, Francis reflected on the meaning of Christ's choice to wash the feet of his disciples.

“Washing the feet was a habit at that time,” he said. “But who washed the feet? The slaves.”

He explained that Jesus performed this gesture to help his disciples better understand what would happen the next day at his crucifixion.

The lesson we should take from this is to help one another, the pope said. “Jesus, today, with this celebration, wants to teach us this: nobility of heart.”

Pope Francis, who was in the hospital for three days last week for treatment for bronchitis, arrived at the prison in a white Fiat. He was brought inside the chapel in a wheelchair and during the Mass he mostly remained seated.

At the end of his homily, Francis said he will repeat Jesus' gesture of the washing of the feet as a reminder of the lesson to help one another. “Life is more beautiful like that,” he said.

“During the washing of the feet ‘I hope to get there because I can't walk well’ during the washing of the feet, think: Jesus washed my feet, Jesus saved me,” he urged the young people.

“[Someone might think,] ‘but I have this difficulty, this!’” he added. “It will pass! The Lord is next to you and he will never abandon you, never. Think of this.”

After the homily, Pope Francis walked with the help of a cane to where 10 young men and two young women sat on a raised platform near the altar.

The platform allowed the pope to wash and kiss their feet without getting all the way on the ground as he has done in past years.

The Mass of the Lord's Supper, offered on the evening of Holy Thursday, marks Christ's institution of the Eucharist and the Mass.

Pope Francis told the young prison inmates that Jesus is never shocked by what we are on the inside, because he already knows our weaknesses: “He is never scared, because he has already paid [our debt]. He just wants to accompany us, he wants to take us by the hand so that life is not so hard for us.”

We often see the many bad things in society, he said, and we think, “thank goodness I am not like that!”

“I am not like that” is for the grace of God,” he said. “Each one of us could stray. Each one of us.”

During his time as pope “and as a bishop before that” Francis has made it a regular tradition to celebrate Holy Thursday Mass with the imprisoned.

His first Holy Thursday Mass as pope, just 15 days after his election, was also at Casal del Marmo prison on the northwest outskirts of Rome.

The juvenile detention center has approximately 50 young people ages 14-25, from different countries and with diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, and religions, according to Vatican News.

In the morning on Thursday, Pope Francis presided over a chrism Mass with more than 1,800 priests in St. Peter’s Basilica. He thanked priests for the “hidden good” they do, often in a ministry carried out “with great effort and little recognition.”

Despite his illness and hospitalization last week, Francis was expected to preside over an intense schedule of Holy Week liturgies and services.

- CNA