



DIOCESE OF BELLEVILLE

Office of the Bishop

April 26, 2009
Third Sunday of Easter

Dear Priests, Deacons and Parish Life Coordinators,

I hope that you and the People of God in your parishes are still rubbing their eyes in the face of the brilliant light of the Easter mysteries celebrated during Holy Week. I wish to thank you for everything you did that contributed to the prayerful celebration of the saving events by which we are reborn in Christ. In this note I wish to respond to a number of questions about Holy Week.

HOLY WEEK QUESTIONS

Delegation for Confirmation

When does a priest need to seek delegation from the Bishop in order to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation? Ordinarily, when a Catechumen or candidate is enrolled in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program and is to be baptized or received into full communion in the Church at the Easter Vigil, the priest celebrant automatically has delegation to confirm in this unique circumstance. However, in order to confirm a baptized Catholic, who has not been raised in the faith, at the Easter Vigil, delegation must always be sought from the Bishop, prior to conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation. This applies even if the Catholic in question attends the R.C.I.A. program.

How early should you write for delegation? When the need arises for a priest to receive delegation from the Diocesan Bishop to Administer the Sacrament of Confirmation at the Easter Vigil (or any other circumstance), the Pastor or the Parish Life Coordinator should write a letter seeking this delegation at least one month prior to the Easter Vigil. Letters seeking delegation should be on parish stationary, signed and sent by regular mail, rather than by electronic mail. Faxes sent on the afternoon of Wednesday of Holy Week may not receive a response, since the Chancery is closed on Holy Thursday.

Holy Thursday “Washing of the Feet”

In the past four years I have received inquiries concerning the Church’s ancient practice of commemorating the profound action of Jesus Christ who washed the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper. The main questions have been: May we replace this ritual with something else? Who has the authority to make such a change? Is the rite optional? Should it be for twelve men only?

Some of the Christian Faithful and some priests have informed me that their parishes have “abandoned the practice of washing feet” many years ago because they thought that this rite was “optional,” or considered “no longer relevant.” They also informed me that at times “washing of hands” has replaced Christ’s timeless demonstration of “emptying Himself” and selfless-service. It is important that we remind ourselves of the intrinsic theological and liturgical connection between Baptism, Eucharist, and all forms of ministry in the Church and the sacramental “Washing of the Feet” ritual.

I am aware that in the United States a few parishes have replaced Christ’s ritual action with hand washing, and other gestures developed by parish liturgy committees. However, I wish to stress that no liturgical author, no parish committee, no parish priest, and indeed, no Bishop has the authority to change any ritual determined by the Catholic Church and rooted in the scriptural words and deeds of Christ Himself. We have no more authority to replace the Washing of the Feet with something “more relevant” than we have the authority to replace the Bread and Wine at Mass, or Baptism in the name of the Most Blessed Trinity with “something more relevant.” No individual or group in the parish has the authority to impose their own “rituals” on the Christian Faithful, who have the right to experience all of the rites of the Sacred Liturgy as the Church intends them to be celebrated. A primary responsibility of the Bishop of the Diocese is to make sure that in every case the Church’s liturgy is celebrated properly. This is clearly stated in The General Instruction on the Roman Missal.

The Washing of the Feet is the very heart of St. John’s Gospel account of the Last Supper (Jn 13, 1-15). Indeed, his omission of the institution of the Eucharist itself may have been to emphasize the meaning of the foot washing sacramental action. Using the exact same Greek verb used for Baptism, the Lord says, “If I do not wash you, you will have no share in My inheritance.” This “bathing,” this “cleansing,” is necessary if one wishes to participate in the life of the Church, the resurrection, and the Father’s Kingdom. Jesus then instructs the Apostles and all of us, **“But if I have washed your feet, I who am Teacher and Lord,-then you must wash each other’s feet. What I have done was an example for you. What I have done, you also must do!”** In these words and with this gesture Christ sums up and embodies the entire meaning of His life, His crucifixion and His death, His willingness to be the Suffering Servant of God. This is also the entire meaning of the Christian life of all who follow Him. If Christ had wanted to teach us this essential lesson by washing hands, He would have. But He did not!

The instruction in the Sacramentary is clear: “The Washing of the Feet follows the homily, depending on pastoral circumstances.” There is no mention whatsoever of some alternative ritual. The American Bishops have never indicated that there was a pastoral circumstance in this country to suggest omitting this timeless rite. I know of no such circumstance in this Diocese to warrant this omission. In most countries twelve men participate, representing the Apostles and reminding us of the close link between this rite and the priesthood. In parishes where this tradition is maintained there is no obligation to change it. In recent years some parishes in the United States have included men and women.

Beginning on Holy Thursday of next year (2010), I would ask that any parish that has eliminated the Washing of the Feet or replaced it with something else to restore this profound ritual action to its rightful place. It “incarnates” the very meaning of Jesus’ “*mandatum novum*,” “A new commandment I give unto you, love one another as I have loved you.” (Please confer the powerful writings on this topic by the distinguished Scripture scholar, the Reverend Raymond Brown, SS, (e.g. The Death of the Messiah.)

Good Friday Celebration of the Lord’s Passion

The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday is the central moment of the drama of the Triduum. All other worthy devotional practices such as Stations are secondary. In order to emphasize this, Mass may not be celebrated. Several parishes have asked this question: Is it appropriate to celebrate the Passion in the afternoon and then to celebrate the Stations of the Cross in the evening? In my judgment, it is liturgically incorrect to do this. It is a liturgical contradiction to solemnly celebrate the death and burial of the Lord and then return to the church a few hours later to contemplate the sufferings of the living Christ in the Stations when the parish community should be contemplating His death. There is, however, the practical pastoral concern for people who are working and unable to attend an afternoon service of the Lord’s Passion. And it may be difficult to celebrate the Passion Liturgy twice. The solution for this followed by many parishes is to have the Stations **at the earlier hour (e.g. noon)** and to have the Commemoration of the Passion in the afternoon (3:00 PM), or the evening. This is certainly the preferred arrangement. Beginning next year, **I urge every parish to respect and follow this preferred and more appropriate liturgical order.**

A related Good Friday question is this: If a parish participates in an ecumenical reading of the Passion or children’s “Living Stations of the Cross,” may one of these activities take the place of the Good Friday Liturgy? These activities are surely meaningful for the participants. However, they may never take the place of the Good Friday Liturgy. The liturgies of the Sacred Triduum constitute a liturgical drama in three profoundly interconnected acts. To leave out the Good Friday rite would remove the heart from the Triduum. Furthermore, it would deprive the People of the Body and Blood of Christ on the day on which they most want to be united with Him.

In 1998, the Bishop’s Committee on the Liturgy stressed the pre-eminence of the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion and Death. The committee wrote, “Devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, processions of the Passion, and commemorations of the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary should not be neglected. The time of day chosen for such devotions, however, should make it clear that the liturgical celebration of the Lord’s passion by its very nature far surpasses them in importance. All devotions should be so fashioned that they accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it.”

A final Good Friday question: Is the role of the Christus reserved to the Deacon in the proclamation of the passion on Palm Sunday and Good Friday? This was erroneously stated in a recent mailing. Obviously, the priest who is celebrant at the Palm Sunday Mass or presiding at the Good Friday Passion is always free to read the role of the Christus.

The Time of the Easter Vigil

When the Easter Vigil is celebrated fully, including the Sacraments of Initiation, the Holy Saturday Liturgy can be somewhat lengthy, especially if there are many candidates. This has led to some concerns about the time of evening for the Vigil to commence. The entire celebration of the Easter Vigil (“the mother of all vigils,”—St. Augustine) should take place at night. It should either begin after nightfall, which is likely to be around 7:30 or 8:00 PM. It should end before the dawn of Sunday. Even though it might be more convenient for some parishioners, the Vigil should NOT begin at 4:00, 5:00, or 6:00 PM, long before dark.

I hope this clarifies these matters for those who were uncertain about them.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward K. Braxton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton
Bishop of Belleville

P.S. Next Sunday is the 46th World Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life. Please pray the Prayer for Vocations at all of the weekend masses. Please include petitions for Vocations to the Priesthood and the Religious Life in the Prayers of the Faithful.

On Saturday, May 30, 2009 we will celebrate the Ordination of Deacon at the Cathedral at 10:00 AM. Please plan to attend and bring a delegation from your Parish. More details will follow soon.