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Pope Francis washes the feet of an inmate at the Rebibbia women's prison on the outskirts of

Pope Francis washes the feet of an inmate at the Rebibbia women's prison on the outskirts of Rome as he celebrates the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper March 28, 2024. The pontiff washed the feet of 12 inmates at the prison. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Rome — March 28, 2024
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As Pope Francis poured water over their feet, dried them with a towel and kissed their feet, 12 women inmates at Rome's Rebibbia prison wept.

The pope celebrated the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper March 28 at the women's prison under a tent set up outside.

The 12 women whose feet were washed by Francis during the liturgy sat on stools on a raised platform so the pope, who has difficulty walking, could wash their feet while seated in his wheelchair.

Many of the women were wearing warmup suits and were fidgeting as they awaited the pope. They included women from Italy, Bulgaria, Nigeria, Ukraine, Peru, Venezuela and Bosnia-Herzegovina. All are housed in the medium-security section, Vatican News reported.

Since it was Francis' first Holy Thursday visit to a prison with only women present, it was the first time as pope that he washed the feet only of women.

After Mass, he gave a large chocolate Easter egg to a little boy, the only toddler currently living with his mother in the prison, according to the prison director. Italian prisons have special units for mothers with children and the law allows women who are detained to keep their children with them until they are 3 years old.

Francis has made a tradition of celebrating the Holy Thursday Mass at a prison or juvenile detention facility, often washing the feet of both men and women, whether Catholic or not.

And, keeping with his practice at the facilities, he gave only a brief homily, speaking without notes.

By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus humbles himself, the pope said. "With this gesture, he makes us understand what he had said, 'I came not to be served but to serve.' He teaches us the path of service."

The evening Gospel reading also included the line, "The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over."

Francis told the women that Judas was incapable of love, and so "money, selfishness lead him to this horrible thing" of betraying Jesus.

But, the pope said, "Jesus forgives everything. Jesus always forgives. He only asks that we ask pardon."

Quoting a "wise, old woman," Francis said, "Jesus never tires of forgiving, but we tire of asking forgiveness."

"Today, let's ask the Lord for the grace not to tire," he said. "All of us have small failures, big failures -- everyone has their own story -- but the Lord awaits us always with open arms and never tires of forgiving."

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Before he washed the women's feet, Francis encouraged the women to pray that "the Lord will make all of us grow in the vocation of service."

The Vatican press office said about 200 people were present, including many seated outside the tent on the lawn. The prison director said 360 women are currently housed at the facility.

Archbishop Diego Giovanni Ravelli, the papal master of liturgical ceremonies, was the main celebrant at the altar.

Fr. Andrea Carosella, the main chaplain at the Rebibbia prison complex, told Vatican News that the women themselves invited the pope. "For them, the pope's visit is a sign of his great attention to the prison reality and is a great encouragement."

Francis washing the women's feet, he said, "is a sign of the mercy and love of God who goes out to meet the suffering and pain of humanity."

Sr. Maria Pia Iammarino, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, told Vatican News that Francis' ministry to the women is a model.

In her ministry at the prison, she said, "I do not need to tell them that God loves them, but to be a witness of God's love for them, to look at them with benevolence and acceptance without judgment. Then, when you have gained the trust of the inmates, you can add words."