

Message of redemption for inmates on Holy Thursday

Wuerl holds traditional foot-washing at jail

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The overcrowded chapel was sweltering, but Catholic Bishop Donald Wuerl had an utterly attentive audience as he prepared to wash the feet of inmates at the Allegheny County Jail.

He told them that Jesus had offered his life as ransom.

"Imagine if someone said, 'I'll serve your sentence,'" he told 100 male inmates in red prison uniforms.

"That is what Jesus did in his death for anything that any one of us would ever do."

The jail chaplain had expected 75 inmates, prepared for 90 and had to bring in extra chairs. Wuerl has visited the jail many times and confirmed some of the inmates last year.

He told them the Eucharist that Jesus instituted on Holy Thursday would give them the strength to live a redeemed life. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, Wuerl said, he was showing them how to live.

"It's possible to care for one another. It's possible to see some goodness in one another. It's possible to do the things that make for a better world," he said.

Wuerl first washed inmates' feet in 1989, a year after becoming bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh.

His predecessor had created a furor by refusing to wash the feet of women, since participants are supposed to represent the 12 male apostles. On his first Holy Thursday as bishop in 1988, Wuerl pointedly washed the feet of six women and six men at St. Paul Cathedral.

He then moved the service out of the cathedral, taking it to jails, nursing homes and other places whose residents cannot go to him.

He arranged last night's visit months before this week's deaths of two female inmates. He is not allowed to include inmates of both sexes in the same service, so he could not include women last night, he said.

Removing his outer vestment and wrapping a linen sheet around his waist, Wuerl knelt at the feet of each of 12 inmates. Before using a white ceramic pitcher and bowl to wash their feet, he shook hands with each man and chatted briefly.

The jail may be his favorite place to do confirmations. He recalled one year when the first inmate confirmed was so overwhelmed that he began to weep and then threw his arms around him.

The remaining confirmands thought the hug was part of the ritual, and did the same. It was, Wuerl recalled, "the only place I've been where everyone has hugged me."

He greeted the inmates on the way out. The men, whose names were not allowed to be printed, expressed great appreciation.

"It was very powerful. That was the first time I've ever met the bishop. It means a lot to me that he came," one young man said.

An older man said, "It gave me hope for getting out of this place and doing better with my life."