

Chrism Mass Homily - 2015

At the heart of today's Chrism Mass is the blessing of the holy oils – the oil for anointing catechumens - those to be baptised, the oil for anointing the sick, and the chrism for the great sacraments that confer the Holy Spirit: confirmation and priestly ordination.

The oil of catechumens reminds us of the first stirrings of God's Spirit in the human heart. This oil points to the first manner of being drawn to Christ. It celebrates an inner touch, by which the Lord draws people close to himself. Through this first anointing, which takes place even prior to baptism, our gaze is turned toward those who will receive the sacrament of baptism; we pray especially for their parents that they may indeed be the first teachers in the way of faith, and the best teachers, through their own lives of faith. We also think of the many in our society who are searching - for beauty, for truth, for goodness, all of which we believe, is really a search for God, even when this is not articulated. We must try to help them to see that this search finds an answer in the Anointed one, Jesus Christ, the one who is the fulfilment of all prophecy, and who comes to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken.....

The oil for anointing the sick is the visible sacramental expression of the Church's mission of healing and being close to the sick and the suffering. I want to express a special thank you to all those who care for the sick and who exercise a particular care for the dying. Your service and sensitivity have comforted so many, and reassured them that the Cross they experience is life-giving. Thank you especially to the priests who help our people to prepare themselves for the final journey, for their individual judgment and the experience of looking into the Lord's merciful face.

Especially today it is the odour of the Chrism which fills our Cathedral; It is a mixture of olive oil and aromatic oils. In the Church this oil serves chiefly for the anointing of confirmation and ordination. So we pray today for the young people of our Diocese that the imprint of a lasting character on their soul through the sacrament of Confirmation may indeed open them to the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. May they have the courage necessary to be followers of Jesus in the 21st Century.

Today we welcome Fr Ralph Candy among our presbyterate as he celebrates his first Chrism Mass as a priest of the diocese. Your hands still, perhaps, have the whiff of the chrism; for those of us who have been longer in the priesthood it has seeped deeply into the depths of our hearts. We

commit ourselves also to pray for Jacek Kostuch and Colin Groombridge as they prepare for priestly ordination. Their hands will be anointed with this oil of Chrism this summer. In thinking of them we pray that many more in our Diocese will answer the call of God to the priesthood and, in this Year of Consecrated Life, that many will see the beauty of the Religious life, too.

When we became priests, the ceremony began with an invitation, 'Those to be ordained priests please come forward'. As we stood, we responded, perhaps a little blithely, "*Adsum. Present!*" Did we have any idea what we were doing and saying? Like the apostles in the Gospels, we answered with naive enthusiasm. Like a young man making his marriage vows; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, all the while hoping it will be for the better, the richer, and for the good health.

Yet none of us knew completely what we were getting into when Christ said, "Follow me." We had a vague notion that the path might lead to Calvary. We knew in theory. Living it is different. In these past few years especially we have lived through some of the most challenging times that the Church has had to face.

I remember when I was ordained priest, Cardinal Hume, who ordained me, preached on the prayer that is made when the Bishop hands the chalice and paten to the new priest: "understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's Cross."

At the time I found it a little daunting and used to wonder what it could mean. Now, after almost 25 years of priesthood, I have a better idea. The reality is that we are afraid of the Cross. Yet, the fear of the Cross is what makes us mediocre. The fear of suffering. In these days one of the most poignant prayers we hear the Lord make, is in Gethsemane: "Let this chalice pass from me, but not my will but thine be done". When he said those words, Peter was watching and listening, but when the soldiers came the apostles fled. They ran. Peter tried to follow Jesus at a safe distance. That didn't work. In the attempt, he denied his master three times. It is impossible to follow Jesus at a safe distance. We need to follow Him up close.

In these last weeks of Lent, it has been good to pray the stations of the Cross and to try to follow him up close. It is good to see ourselves in the people who accompanied Jesus. I only realised recently, the difference between the fifth and sixth station. At the fifth station, Simon of Cyrene is pressed into service. He was embarrassed to be part of an execution,

perhaps angry, because he was innocent and forced to be part of a spectacle. I like to think that later, when Simon looked back on that horrific experience of carrying Christ's cross, he saw it as the defining moment in his life. Certainly we know that his sons, Rufus and Alexander, surface in Acts and in the Epistles. So Simon must have embraced the faith and passed it to his family.

But his hesitancy before the Cross is something we all recognise. It contrasts with the spontaneous and courageous gesture of compassion shown in the sixth station by Veronica. She overcame fear and drew near to Christ. She willingly went to comfort The Lord in his suffering. And was blessed in the process by receiving the imprint of His face. I suppose part of our priestly vocation is precisely to make the journey from the fifth to the sixth station. To move out of our resistance to the Cross and instead to willingly embrace Jesus in His passion.

As priests we must overcome our fears: of suffering, of failure, of shame, of sickness, of death, of being alone. Only love can cast out all these fears. Today our great High Priest, and Suffering Servant asks us if we are willing to drink the cup, as we make our priestly promises. Again we answer, "Adsum – yes, I am". This brings us into Jesus' own intimacy with His Father. That intimacy gave Jesus the strength to drink His cup. That same intimacy, Jesus wants to give to us so that we can drink ours.

So, follow the Master up close, do not fear the chalice, do not fear the Cross. Fear only not loving enough, that is the only real tragedy. The only real failure in the priesthood of Jesus Christ is not loving enough.

Let us strive to live as His priests, servants of the Suffering Servant, who grasp the chalice firmly each day, who know what we are doing, who imitate what we handle, who conform our lives to His Cross.

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