

A Chrism Mass farewell

By Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien

Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien gave the following homily at the Chrism Mass April 2 at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Homeland.

Good evening to all and thank God for the graces that bring us together for this unique liturgical moment!

For those who are participating in a Chrism Mass for the first time, a brief orientation is in order. The word chrism is derived from the Greek and refers to the sacred oil that will be consecrated by local bishops this week in every Catholic cathedral of the world. Throughout the year ahead, this special oil of chrism will be used to anoint the newly baptized, those confirmed and those ordained priests and bishops. The word Christ comes from this oil, for Christ means “the anointed one.” In Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders, each Christian becomes increasingly “Christ-ed” – more fully resembling and, indeed becoming, in a deeply spiritual and interior way, the person of Christ Himself.

Two additional oils will also be blessed: the oil of the sick, for the Anointing of the Sick, and the oil of catechumens, to strengthen in Faith those who will be baptized at this Saturday’s Easter Vigil and throughout the year.

A document dating from the early 200s AD suggests that this Chrism Liturgy was celebrated in very ancient Christianity – first on Holy Saturday, later on Holy Thursday, or on another nearby day more convenient for the attendance of the faithful. On this evening, especially, the presence of priests is called for. Their priestly anointing with Chrism signals their full configuration to Christ, the Anointed One. And aren’t we blessed with a magnificent number of your priests here tonight!

As we know, it is on this night that we celebrate Christ’s institution of the Priesthood

that took place at the Last Supper. Immediately having pronounced, "This is my Body...This is my Blood..." Jesus charged the Apostles, his first priests, "Do this in remembrance of me," thus establishing the Apostolic Priesthood in an unbroken succession that remains today.

The People of God, therefore, you good Faithful, gather tonight not simply to thank our High Priest for instituting the Order of Priests, as surely you do. You come as well to demonstrate your gratitude to your priests of this great Archdiocese and to offer them, priests both diocesan and religious, your encouragement and your love.

It was in 1967 that Pope Paul VI renewed the ceremony we celebrate tonight:

"The Chrism Mass is one of the principal expressions of the fullness of the bishop's priesthood and signifies the closeness of the priests with him."

Of the Chrism Mass, he went on to say:

"In order to strengthen (priests') spiritual life and the sense of priesthood, it is most desirable that ... every priest ... renew the act by which he committed himself to Christ and by which he promised to carry out the priesthood's responsibilities, especially to observe celibacy and obedience to his bishop. ... Also, that in his spirit he celebrate the gift, sealed by the sacrament of Holy Orders, that is his calling to service of the Church." This we will soon all witness.

On this, my last Chrism Mass as head of this Archdiocese I would like to salute our priests personally. To our growing number of native Spanish speaking priests:

Quiero ofrecer mis más expresivas gracias a los muchos sacerdotes de otros países que sirven al creciente número de católicos que hablan español,

aquí en la Arquidiócesis. Vuestro ministerio entre nosotros es inestimable

y profundamente apreciado por mí, y por todo el clero de Baltimore.

La contribución que hacen las muchas comunidades hispanas nos enriquecen, y los esfuerzos que ustedes, Padres, hacen por ellos, son una gran bendición para nuestra Iglesia local.

And to all my priests, led by His Eminence Cardinal William Keeler, Bishop William Newman (unable to be present), our Vicar Bishops Mitchell T. Rozanski and Denis J. Madden and our Vicar General, Monsignor Richard Woy: four years ago on this night of Chrism – it was on St. Patrick’s Day, 2008, in fact, that I said these words:

“And to you priests – priests whom I am now privileged and humbled to call my priests on this sacred evening – the Liturgy says it all, or almost all. Fathers, I speak personally in thanking you for welcoming me into your midst.” I continued: “I want to tell you how much I treasure our bonds of fraternity, and am inspired by your priestly zeal for and commitment to our people. I depend upon your ongoing counsel and friendship and pray you will forgive my shortcomings.”

Brothers, my prayer that evening, my fervent hope, could not have been more fully realized these 4½ years, thanks to God’s grace and your own love for and your sacramental incorporation in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ. I thank you!

I can state without reservation that in Archbishop William Lori as the 16th Archbishop of Baltimore you will experience a truly inspired appointment by our Holy Father. He will prove to be a prayerful, intelligent and zealous shepherd. And a ready friend to you, his brothers, as he has been to me for many years.

He has a number of crucial decisions that await him, decisions that I fully expected to make, if not with enthusiasm. In the ensuing kabuki rites of coming to know each other – inevitable between a newly appointed bishop and a well-rooted and, even grizzled, clergy – I know that you will be no less generous, trusting and welcoming toward him as you have so consistently been to me.

Finally, it will remain my prayer in the months and years ahead that this Premier See will be in the forefront among all the Churches in our land in the numbers of candidates for priesthood. Thanks to the efforts of our recent vocation directors, it is my impression that many of our brother priests have taken special notice of the need for more energetic efforts on their part in attracting an increase in healthy, spiritually motivated men to serve with you and after you. They are out there, Fathers, looking for the inspiration, the invitation that is principally yours to offer them.

In fact, we have here some 20 men, vocations in progress, who have spent this day in vocation discernment. May the singular graces of this Chrism Mass be a source of encouragement to them and to all the faithful here in encouraging the call to priesthood. And may those graces inspire the prayers and actions of us all this Holy Week as we seek an ever deeper love and devotion to the Lord, Jesus Christ.