

Chrism Mass 2008

The celebration of the Mass of Chrism marks a privileged moment for the People of God throughout the Church Universal this week and what a privileged moment this is for me to stand in your midst, the People of God of Baltimore.

Should the history and development of this unique liturgical event not be familiar, I suspect a brief review would be in order.

The rite we celebrate this evening is a 1967 restoration of the rite we find recorded in the early 200s. In a document called *The Apostolic Tradition*, the fullest and most important source outside of Scripture for the liturgical life of the early Church, the historian Hippolytus writes of a ceremony taking place during the Easter Vigil at which two holy oils were blessed and one was consecrated. Such a ceremony occurring in the very heart of the holiest night of the Church year suggests that these oils represent something quite significant in the life of our ancient Church.

Hippolytus mentions the two oils being blessed by the bishop: the oil of the sick and the oil of exorcism, which we now call the oil of catechumens, used before baptisms to put to flight any contagions that might obstruct the impending baptismal graces.

The third oil, chrism, — from which this Mass and the very name of Christ, the anointed one, takes its name - is not just blessed but is consecrated by the bishop and only by the bishop. The prayer of consecration is called a “Eucharistic prayer” — a prayer of thanksgiving -and just as in the Eucharistic consecration of the bread and wine, priests present will concelebrate by extending their hands and praying silently the prayer of consecration over the chrism with the bishop.

In the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation—two of the three sacraments of initiation—Holy Chrism will be used to anoint, to “Christ” members of the Body of Christ. This anointing indelibly marks those who receive these sacraments as children of God and disciples for Christ. In addition, throughout the world this year priests and bishops will be consecrated as this same oil of Chrism is poured over them. As a result, they will preach and teach in His voice, forgive sins and anoint the sick as if Christ himself were doing so - and He is! They are empowered to lend their voice to the voice of Jesus as they speak with a sense of awe and in the very first person of Christ, this is my body, my blood. The miracle of the altar occurs because your priests have been chrismed into Christ.

Priests are called to the work that Jesus claims for himself in fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah: “to bring glad tidings to the poor... to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” All baptized disciples, priests in their midst, help to reveal the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate.

In the fifth century, the ceremony of the oils was transferred from the Holy Saturday Vigil to Holy Thursday during a special Mass for that purpose, distinct from the Mass of the Lord’s Supper. The change of days took place, partly, because of the large crowds that assembled for the Easter Vigil, but also to emphasize Christ’s institution of this ordained priesthood at Holy Thursday’s Last Supper. The 1967 restoration allowed the Chrism Mass to be celebrated before Holy Thursday for the convenience of priests, all of whom are urged to concelebrate both this Chrism Mass as well as Thursday’s Liturgy of the Lord’s Supper.

Pope Paul VI’s decree renewing this rite states:

“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.”

It was this same Pope who joined to this Mass a specific Renewal of Commitment of Priestly Service. The instructions initiating this addition say so much about the singular meaning of this Mass: for the ministerial priesthood, for each of our priests and for all the faithful. It says:

“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 orders, that is his calling to service of the Church.”

Good Catholic people - and I humbly address all of you and all whom you represent - deacons and consecrated sisters and brothers, seminarians and laity at every level of diocesan and parish leadership: I know that I speak for your priests, here in such impressive numbers, in expressing our thanks for your indispensable collaboration in preaching the love of Christ and promoting the life of the Church in this great Archdiocese.

And I pray that you will see in this Mass a significant opportunity to demonstrate your love and appreciation of your priests. If it be God’s will, may the intended priestly focus of this Chrism Mass stress the uniqueness of ordained priesthood and generate the graces so necessary to encourage many more priestly vocations of the kind we see here.

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 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.

As I have made pastoral visits thus far to most of the parishes in the city and in six of our nine counties, I have had the opportunity to catch just a glimpse of the work that you and those who collaborate with you do on daily basis. I have sought to listen and will continue to do so. The task of ministering to God's people in the countless ways that you do is a monumental one. Know of my support, my gratitude, and my prayers for you and for all who work so tirelessly serving our Lord in the Church.

May the sacred oils of healing and strengthening which I will soon bless, and may the bread and wine and Chrism of sanctification which we will soon consecrate in concelebration, flow in abundance from the heart of Christ, through us, to enrich the hearts and souls of all his priestly people all through the year ahead.