

Chrism Mass 2014

A First Mass Homily?

Dear seminarians: Suppose that on the day after your priestly ordination, you went to your home parish to celebrate your first Mass, stood in the pulpit, and proclaimed yourself to be the Messiah. No doubt the eyes of the entire congregation would be upon you! This must be one of the reasons why *all* of us as newly ordained priests asked other priests to preach our first Masses!

Preposterous as it may seem to proclaim oneself the Messiah, that is just what Jesus did in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth. The people there knew Jesus as a carpenter and they knew his family. Yet, Jesus stood there and applied the prophecy of Isaiah to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me" ... to bring glad tidings, freedom, reconciliation, comfort and joy. In effect, Jesus was saying to a startled congregation that he was the fulfillment of all that they and their ancestors had hoped and prayed for.

Book of Revelation: The Laity As Principal Agents of the New Evangelization

But, dear friends, the reading from the Book of Revelation goes even further. Not only does it proclaim the Lordship of Christ - "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth," but it also goes on to say that this Lord and Savior "has made us into a Kingdom, priests for his God and Father."

Here, the Book of Revelation refers not only to the Ordained Priesthood but to the priesthood every member of the Church shares because of Baptism. So it is that "the Spirit of the Lord" is upon the whole people of God, a people anointed with the Oil of Catechumens and Chrism at Baptism; anointed again with Chrism at Confirmation, and in time of serious illness with the Oil of the Sick. This people *is* a communion of life, truth, goodness, and love, made up of individuals who are each loved by God and called to holiness, that is, called to be and to live like the Christ of the Beatitudes, and sent forth into the world to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

In a recent day of prayer for priests serving in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Auxiliary Bishop Michael Byrnes of Detroit said that the laity are the principal

agents of the New Evangelization. Dear friends, I'm guessing that's not what you'd print on your business cards: "Agent of the New Evangelization" – but that is what you are called to be. Fellow Christians, members of the laity: the Spirit of the Lord is upon you so that you may weave the Gospel into the fabric of your lives – your vocation, your family life, your work, your relationships with others. As men and women of hope, you are called to live differently and that critical difference is "Christ in you the hope of glory!"

Pope Francis continually invites us to open our hearts to Christ so that we, in turn, can be a living invitation to others to open their hearts to Christ. This is what he wrote in his beautiful exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ ... No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her 'since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.'" He adds: "The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk. When we take a step toward Jesus, we realize that He is already there, waiting for us with open arms ... " (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 1). Yes, as we come to know the Christ, the anointed one, in a deep and personal way, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon us, making us the bearers of glad tidings.

The Ordained Priesthood: Beyond Our Comfort Zone

Pope Francis' invitation should resonate with special intensity in the heart of each of us, your bishops and priests, together with the deacons. To paraphrase St. Augustine, 'With you we are Christians, for you we are priests.' We tread the same path of discipleship and holiness that you, the laity, tread, but we do so as those called to a specific vocation of holiness and service. It is a vocation to make living and real the Word of God – the Word of God made flesh who speaks to us "words of spirit and life", the Word of God made flesh who is the fulfillment of all our hopes, Jesus, who died on the Cross and rose from the grave to save us from sin and death and who gives himself to us again and again in the Eucharist. It is our vocation to represent Jesus the Head, Shepherd, and Spouse of his beloved Bride, the Church, the Body of Christ, the People of God.

This is not a vocation of supremacy but of humble service. Who has illustrated this more vividly than Pope Francis? – his obedience as a son of the Church to the promptings of the Holy Spirit; his simplicity, his sparing use of this world's goods for

the sake of the Gospel; his single-hearted love for the Lord and for the Church, coupled with an avid life of prayer and warm pastoral charity for all.

Dear brother priests: The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, enabling us to speak and act in the very Person of Christ, the Head of the Church. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, prompting us in a deeply personal way to think like Christ, to act like Christ, to live like Christ – to have the mind of Christ! The Spirit of the Lord is calling us to an evangelical style of life – a life of prayer, loving obedience, simplicity, and celibacy – all for the sake of mission – so that we might not only perform a function in the life of the Church, but rather bear *personal* witness through self-giving love to the Christ whose saving words and deeds we sacramentally re-present.

What is more, the Spirit of the Lord sends us forth, far from our comfort zones, to bring the glad tidings of the Gospel to what Pope Francis calls “the margins” – love and respect for the poor, forgiveness to sinners, loving correction to the erring. encouragement to families, hope for the young, welcome to the wandering.

Yet, isn’t the case that when we preach, celebrate the sacraments, and guide the church’s ministries, people want to know whether we have “skin in the game” – Do we pray? Do we know and love Jesus? Are we trying to follow him? Are we true to our promises? Do we give of ourselves? If the answer is “yes”, the young will accept vocations to priesthood & religious life. If the answer is “yes”, the laity will want to work with us in spreading the Gospel. Evangelization requires a vibrant partnership between the ordained and the laity. Reaching those who no longer practice their faith or who never heard the good news requires that *everyone* in the Church be dedicated to Christ, live their vocations, and work together in a spirit holiness, trust, and mutual respect thus to show to the world its Redeemer, Jesus, the Christ.

Conclusion: 225th Year

This year the Archdiocese of Baltimore gratefully celebrates its 225th anniversary. No diocese in the United States has the unique distinctions of the Premier See. God gave us these distinctions so that we might treasure them and rejoice in them but not so that we might rest upon our laurels, wonderful as they are! No, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us – upon bishops, priests, deacons, & seminarians, upon men and women in consecrated life & upon the members of the laity – and we are called as

never before to band together in our specific vocations so as to bear united and loving witness to Christ, to bring glad tidings to every corner of this Archdiocese, to win back the lost, to guide the searching, to go out to those on the margins - and to ensure that every parish, every school, every social service agency and ministry will reflect Christ's total gift of self and proclaim the glad tidings he came to bring.

May God bless us and keep us always in His love!