

Chrism Mass includes renewal of commitments, distribution of holy oils

The undercroft of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland was stocked March 26 with 158 cases, each containing three vessels to be filled with the oils during the Archdiocese of Baltimore's annual chrism Mass.

The oils will be used in churches throughout the archdiocese.

Behind the scenes at a Mass celebrated by Archbishop William E. Lori, parishes brought their own vessels to the cathedral. They ranged from crystal vases to water bottles, metal tubes to Mason jars. The vessels were placed in cases, ranging from Amazon Prime cardboard boxes to a wooden box for St. Ursula in Parkville that was handcrafted by parishioner Thomas Scheve.

"You want to protect (the oils) and carry them in a dignified manner," said Father Jason Worley, pastor of St. Ursula.

Following the Mass, Father Worley transported the oils back to Parkville, where they will stay in the sanctuary until Holy Thursday Mass, when they will be brought up as an offertory and then placed in the parish's ambry, the storage place for oils, usually located in a church's sanctuary.

The same will be done, in various manners, with the other 157 cases. The majority are from the 144 parishes and missions in the archdiocese; the others are from hospitals and religious orders.

Labels on the three vessels from each case read “OI” (from the Latin *oleum infirmorum*), the oil of the infirm, used for the anointing of the sick; “OC/OS” (*oleum catechumenorum* or *oleum sanctorum*), the oil of catechumens, used in the preparation of catechumens for baptism; and “SC/SCH” (*sacrum chrisma*), the holy chrism, used to anoint the newly baptized, seal the candidates for confirmation, anoint the hands of presbyters, anoint the heads of bishops at ordination and to dedicate churches and altars.

Before the vessels are brought to the chrism Mass to be refilled, the previous year’s leftover oils must be disposed of properly - either by burial or burning. Father Worley poured the excess oils along the base of St. Ursula Church; others do so in a cemetery, or burn the oils in a fire or an oil lamp.

Oils

The oils have mundane origins. Julie Grace Males, director of the Office of Divine Worship, ordered 120 liters (almost 32 gallons) of olive oil from Trinacria Foods, an Italian deli and gourmet grocery on North Paca Street in Baltimore, at a cost of approximately \$800.

The holy chrism includes a fragrance - a balsam mix - which Males ordered from The Holy Rood Guild, a religious supply company run by the Order of Cisterians of the Strict Observance, Trappist monks at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Mass. It comes in 16-ounce bottles, which cost \$78 a piece. The archdiocese ordered 12 bottles, each then mixed with about 10 liters of olive oil.

At the chrism Mass, all of the oils were carted into the sanctuary in large containers. The oils of the infirm and catechumens were blessed by Archbishop Lori. He consecrated the holy chrism, pouring the fragrance into the oil and then breathing over the mixture, signifying the presence of the Holy Spirit, all while dozens of

concelebrants raised their hands in union.

The archbishop is the only person in the archdiocese able to consecrate the chrism. Though he cannot be present physically for every baptism, confirmation and anointing, he is present through the holy chrism and blessed oils.

The Oilers

A group of 40 volunteers - called the "Oilers" - stood to the right of the sanctuary, awaiting the completion of the blessing and consecration of the oils. They trailed quietly as the cart containing the oils was transported to a room in the undercroft, where the boxes were neatly organized by size and number.

Part of a 35-year-old ministry, the Oilers had between 30 and 40 minutes to fill the various vessels with the oils while the Mass continued upstairs. The volunteers strive to maintain a quiet atmosphere while pouring the oils.

"It's a sacred thing," volunteer Carole Hays said.

Newspaper lined the tables, and paper towels and cotton balls helped catch smaller spills. There was a bin for "Sacred Oil Trash," debris taken to the farm of Charlie Macsherry in Butler, where it is burned. Macsherry is the brother and son of two long-time Oilers, William and Louise Macsherry, respectively.

Claire Smith, whose mother brought her along to start volunteering soon after the ministry began in the mid-1980s, looks forward to seeing the different vessels and cases brought by the parishes.

"Some of them are very humble," she said, "and some of them are very elaborate."

After Mass, many priests and parish representatives are eager to pick up their oils

and depart. The Oilers expedite the process by assigning each parish case a number and a table – think of a dry cleaner’s.

“It’s amazing how many priests come through here, and how quickly it goes,” said Betty Cox, an Oiler for more than three decades. “It’s a contribution that you can make back to the church.”

The Oilers distributed 24.25 gallons of oil – 7.5 gallons of the oil of catechumens, 10.25 gallons of the oil of the infirm and 6.5 gallons of the holy chrism – which amounts to 3.5 more gallons than in 2017.

There was an increase in large cases this year, and a corresponding decrease in small cases. Gail Fennessey, the Oilers’ coordinator, speculated that this is due to the large number of pastorates that were formed in the last year.

If a parish runs out of oil before the 2019 chrism Mass, a reserve supply is kept at cathedral.

Coming together

Father Worley represented St. Ursula for the first time after beginning his assignment there Jan. 1. He recalled the first time he attended the chrism Mass in his late teens and as a parishioner of St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea, when then-pastor and now-Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski invited him.

“He was nurturing my vocation,” Father Worley said. “It’s coming full circle now.”

Along with the other priests serving in the archdiocese, Father Worley renewed his commitment to priestly service during the Mass.

“I’m saying, ‘Yes,’ once again,” said Father Worley, who added that it was a wonderful feeling to do so alongside the men who inspired him into his vocation at a

young age. “It’s sort of like a family coming together.”

Archbishop Lori shared that sentiment during his [homily](#), when he discussed the importance of prayer in a priest’s daily life.

“The most powerful way that you and I come together each day is in our daily prayer,” Archbishop Lori said. “When I sit down and pray, it is a great support and it is a great comfort to know that priests throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore are doing exactly the same thing.”

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