

Chrism Mass

I. Introduction: A Warm Welcome to All

It is truly my pleasure to celebrate the Chrism Mass for the first time with all of you in this Cathedral dedicated to Mary Our Queen. Our congregation this night really is a microcosm of the Archdiocese: brother bishops, priests, deacons, and seminarians, religious women and men, as well as pastoral life directors. What a joy to see to see so many catechumens and candidates, young people preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation, and representatives of parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Truly we are gathered as a family of faith and I warmly welcome each one of you.

We gather at the end of a momentous Lenten season that witnessed the humble and historic decision of Benedict XVI to lay aside his office and the election of Pope Francis to the See of Peter. To be sure, the Church has been in the news, though not always comfortably; yet we are filled with joy this evening and look to the future with hope.

Dear friends, since the Chrism Mass is a time for priestly renewal and for the blessing of the oils, I hope you won't mind if I first address some words to my brother priests whom I am so happy to see on this evening filled with God's graces.

II. The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me

Dear brothers, for the past few weeks we have gathered in small groups to resume a conversation about the future of the Church in the City of Baltimore and the nine counties that make up this local church. These gatherings remain an invaluable opportunity for me to learn directly from you how the various parishes of the Archdiocese are working together - including what is going well and what is challenging or even frustrating. In these meetings and in all the opportunities I've had in the past ten months to come to know you, to pray with you, to visit your parishes, or to relax with you - I've begun to learn something of your great and generous pastoral love.

Thus it was that these recent meetings turned out to be conversations about evangelization - about fulfilling the Church's deepest identity and mission, viz., to

bring the Good News to every person living within this Archdiocese. These conversations are reflected in today's Gospel where we find Jesus in the Nazareth Synagogue repeating and fulfilling Isaiah's words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me 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"

Hearing these words, dear brothers, are we not reminded of why we became priests? Did we not want to take our stand with Christ, to be anointed by the Holy Spirit, so that we could spend our lives bearing witness to his Gospel? Was it not to bring Christ's definitive Word of joy and hope to those in need? . . . and to bring that same Word of truth and love to those who have enough of this world's goods but who suffer from spiritual poverty? How attracted we were to the prospect of celebrating Mass! . . . to the very idea of setting free through the Sacrament of Reconciliation those trapped in their sins of freeing one and all for a life of discipleship and love. We envisioned that every year would be a year of faith, . . . that every day would be a day acceptable to the Lord!

Returning to those moments of our initial attraction to the priesthood is not an exercise in nostalgia, not a vain attempt to turn back the hands of time, still less a way of ignoring a certain realism that comes with experience. Rather, we're doing what good married couples do when they renew their wedding vows. They don't love each other less because they've stayed together in good times & bad or because they have struggled with problems and sorrows. No, they love each other more & are even more deeply dedicated to their family. This is the spirit in which we are here to rededicate ourselves to the priesthood of Jesus Christ and to the family of faith we are privileged to serve.

III. Evangelized and Evangelizing

The renewal of our priestly lives does not necessarily mean working longer hours. Let me tell you something about my own priestly life. Busyness is often my excuse for avoiding what is truly necessary. It can be a way of delaying difficult decisions a way of sidestepping what needs to be dealt with in my own interior life. Busyness is just one of a garden variety of ways all of us can be diverted from holiness, the first priority in our priestly lives.

Yet, deep down, I know and you know that our efforts to evangelize will not really bear abundant and lasting fruit unless and until we allow the Glad Tidings Jesus announced in the Nazareth synagogue to hit home in our spiritual lives in a deeply personal way. We must be the *first* to allow the Lord to help us face in our souls whatever hinders or even prevents us from being those priests whose lives bear witness to the Gospel we preach and the sacraments we celebrate.

Two examples come to mind, both from the Liturgy of the Hours: First is St. Gregory the Great who warns us all, and most of all myself, not to silence ourselves in preaching the full truth of the Gospel by making some compromise in our own lives with error and sin. Without mincing words, he says that such pastors are “dumb dogs that cannot bark.” Second is St. Charles Borromeo, who was sent to the Archdiocese of Milan when it was falling to pieces in every way imaginable. His response was not to *do* more but to *pray* more – to lead a recollected life – to meditate before, during, and after some activity, *oratio iugis*, constant prayer. He succeeded in reforming the Church in Milan because he succeeded in prayer and those who worked with him did too. When people sense that our preaching is the fruit of our prayer— . . . that it is backed up by a genuine struggle to root out evil from our lives, and, to be formed after the Beatitudes, people will more readily listen – for then we are not merely teachers but witnesses to Christ and to the Gospel. Spiritual direction, the regular use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, praying the Divine Office and offering Mass every day, reading Scripture prayerfully... these are the indispensable tools for spreading the Gospel and renewing the Church.

IV. Pray for Us!

On the night of his election Pope Francis stood before the throngs in St. Peter’s Square and he asked those people, many of them young people, to pray for him . . . This was not something contrived. Those who knew him previously say he does this all the time. We, the priests of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, do well to imitate our new Pope by asking those we serve and with whom we work, to pray for us today and every day. And so, dear brothers & sisters, we turn to you who represent the whole Archdiocese – and we ask your prayers for us your bishops and priests – that we may be faithful to all we promised on the day of our priestly Ordination.

And we priests pledge our prayers for you – for all of you who have gathered with us

this evening – and for every member of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. We draw close to you, dear friends, when we pray for you – remembering your intentions not only at Mass but also in our private prayers. When we are alone in prayer, your struggles resonate in our hearts, struggles with illnesses or economic hardship . . . , worries about children and grandchildren and aging parents, and so much more. . . .

Yet we priests pray not only for your immediate needs and ours; rather, our deepest prayer is for holiness – your holiness and ours – so that, together, we can love what God loves and reject what God rejects – so that, together, we can grow in the likeness of the Christ of the Beatitudes. Even as we priests pray for the grace to accept the Good News into *our own* hearts, so too we pray that you will welcome those same Glad Tidings in yours. We are here, in fact, to help you welcome Christ into your homes and families, to help you find the joy of believing amid the challenges of living and to *enlist* you as co-workers, as cooperators in truth and love, in sharing the Gospel within the Church and far beyond . . . among family members, friends, and colleagues . . . especially with those who, for whatever reason, no longer practice the Faith. We priests are grateful to work side by side with you . . . with deacons, religious, pastoral life directors, lay leaders, and so many parishioners. Without you, the Church’s mission cannot be fulfilled.

V. Anointed by the Spirit

Welcoming the Gospel into our hearts and sharing it with others is not merely a matter of human effort. Today’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was “anointed by the Holy Spirit” – and so too are we, in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders. We are anointed as well in time of serious illness, so that we might bear our sufferings with the strength of Christ. In a word, we are anointed by the Spirit so that Christ might live in us and that we might be his witnesses.

As the Holy Oils are blessed and distributed this evening, the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of Catechumens, and the Holy Chrism, may the Spirit of the Lord be upon us all that we might be the Lord’s faithful, joyous, and effective disciples in every part of this Archdiocese, for the glory of his name, for the good of the Church, and for the salvation of all. Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, pray for us!