The Hopeful, Holy Men of Baltimore

Though not a day of obligation and certainly not as faithfully observed as the other solemn days of Holy Week, the Chrism Mass, which is celebrated in our Archdiocese each Monday of Holy Week, is no less powerful or significant.

The Chrism Mass is so called because it is the annual liturgical moment when the oils used throughout the Church year at baptisms, confirmations, anointing of the sick, and ordinations are blessed.

In the early Church, the oils would be blessed at the Easter Vigil in time to welcome new members into the Church. Then the practice changed and for about 1,000 years or so the Rite was moved to the Holy Thursday liturgy. More recently, the Church has left it up to dioceses to choose whether to continue the practice on Holy Thursday or, out of convenience, to celebrate the Chrism Mass earlier in Holy Week.

As meaningful as this liturgy is for Catholics, the Chrism Mass holds particular significance for priests.

It is the great priestly day in every diocese of the Universal Church when we celebrate the gift of priesthood by Jesus at the Last Supper. In the Mass of Chrism we anticipate Holy Thursday's gift of the Eucharist so as to concentrate in the mystery of that night, ordained priesthood.

It was at the Last Supper that the Lord consecrated Himself to the Father, anticipating the anointing whereby He would consecrate those ordained to the priesthood as His priests; in a sense, Holy Chrism issuing forth from that Last Supper table.

The Mass holds special meaning for bishops too, shedding light on the special bonds that unite a bishop and priest.

The Second Vatican Council calls the Chrism Mass one of the principal expressions of the fullness of the bishop's priesthood and signifies the closeness of his priests to

him. In celebrating this Mass each year I am reminded of the ordination Instruction that insists:

Priests are co-workers of the order of bishops
They are called to share in the priesthood of the bishop
United with the bishop and subject to him, they seek
to bring the faithful together into a unified family

The binding together of bishop and priest for collaboration is not the result of a mere contractual agreement but the result of the Holy Order each priest receives at his ordination by the imposition of the bishop's hands. This brings the newly ordained into communion with the apostolic succession. At that time each new priest hands himself over completely to God and His people – not to a single family or spouse.
With the laying on of hands the newly ordained begins to share in the ministry of the bishop – indeed, the same sacramental grace that courses through the spiritual veins of the bishop begins to run through the new priest's spiritual veins as well. As the bishop of a diocese makes present the love and concern of Peter, Christ's Vicar, so does each priest make present the love and concern of Christ through his bishop.

That only the bishop can consecrate Holy Chrism highlights the unique mystery of the priest-bishop union. For practical reasons, the bishop cannot baptize in every parish, surely. But the bishop will be symbolically represented at every baptism through the Chrism that the priest will use each time he baptizes.

As with the Good Shepherd, so many of our good priests are able to call the members of his flock by name, reassuring them in time of fear, encouraging them in their trials and accompanying them through life, unto death. They lead their people in love, nourish them by their words and strengthen them through the sacraments, especially as they set before them their family, the Paschal Meal, renewing the Sacrifice of our redemption. Truly, they show daily their love for the Flock of Christ, with a Godly, dispossessive love.

All this for the sake of the mission foreseen by Isaiah realized in Christ and continued in priestly ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good tidings – the gospel – to the poor, to proclaim liberty to

the captives, to heal the broken hearted."

At the Chrism Mass, we are reminded each year of that same Spirit given to all priests at our anointing for the preaching of the Gospel to the earth's end.

Father Andrew Greeley once said that what people want most in their priests are hopeful, holy men who smile. People of God, you have such men before you. Please God, you will take seriously your continuing obligation to encourage them – and to encourage others to follow them.