

April 7, 2020 11:00 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Chrism Mass (Live streamed)

No matter how many times we've participated in this beautiful Chrism Mass, something tells me that this year's celebration is far and away the most bizarre year so far---and I hope ever again.

This Mass which is only celebrated in the Cathedral Church of each Diocese, envisions the Cathedral being filled with members of the Clergy and Laity, representing in miniature all the Faithful of the Diocese.

But look---this Cathedral is empty, except for this skeletal grouping of our Choir Director, Cantor, 3 Seminarians, Deacon, an MC., the Cathedral Rector, the Vicar General, and me. However, when I try to envision beyond this empty Cathedral, and look into the rectories and homes of the priests, deacons and lay faithful living in all 9 counties of our Diocese, I can "virtually" see all of you there, secure in your homes, restricted by this pervasive, world-wide coronavirus COVID-19.

And so, while this year's Chrism Mass is taking place in these once-in-a-lifetime circumstances, it remains a beautiful celebration of all that it represents.

The Chrism Mass is the annual blessing of the Holy Oils and the consecration of the Sacred Chrism which will be used in the celebration of the Sacraments in all the parishes throughout the Diocese. A primary focus of the Chrism Mass, then, is on the Sacramental and Pastoral Care of the Faithful of the Diocese.

However, another equally important focus of the Chrism Mass is on the celebration of the Gift of Priesthood, and of the unity and communion of the Priests with their Bishop; it is also always the occasion for all the Priests to renew their Priestly Promises---and we will still do that in a few moments, virtually.

I always look forward to celebrating this special Mass every year---it's truly one of the great privileges of being the Bishop.

As often as we've heard these Scripture Readings which are always used for the Chrism Mass, I find that every year, I tend to hear them in new ways.

The passage from Isaiah, the great Old Testament Prophet, senses the very Holy Spirit of God upon him---"*anointing*" him---and sending him forth to the whole world on a mission of prophesying God's Message of Love---a love that *heals, releases, comforts and proclaims*.

And of course, it was that very passage that Jesus searched the Scroll for in this morning's Gospel, when He came to the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth, and was asked to read and offer His first public sermon. He read the very same passage, because Jesus too knew that the Holy Spirit was upon Him, and within Him, and that His Father had "*anointed*" Him---sent Him---- to BE that message of Love to all the world.

And His sermon? Nine words: "*Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.*" And with those 9 words, He said it all. He INDEED is the fulfillment of that Isaiahan prophesy, because Jesus IS the Word of God made Flesh.

But He was only getting started on the Mission that the Father and the Spirit had given to the Son; this was only His first Sermon. His final Sermon, 3 years later, would be preached at the Last Supper He would share with His Apostles, and then it would be consummated on the Hill called Calvary. His final Sermon would be NO words---just the Loving act of pouring out His very Self for the salvation of the world.

But in that Nazareth Synagogue, in His first sermon, with 9 little words, Jesus proclaimed that the time of waiting was over; He is the fulfillment of all Prophecy!

Besides choosing these Readings every year for the Chrism Mass for that reason, we read these Readings because Jesus----the Christ---the Anointed One of God----also anticipates the Church He would found on the Rock of Peter's Faith. It would be that same mission that He gives to His Church: to *heal, release, comfort and proclaim* in His Name the Good News of His redemptive Love to all the world.

And we who are the baptized followers of Jesus have Jesus' Mission---the Church's mission--as our mission. We who are in the ordained priesthood are called to serve the pastoral and sacramental needs of the lay priesthood; and all of us together---anointed by Baptism to do so----are called to continue what Isaiah first prophesied, and what Jesus proclaimed to be fulfilled in Him: to keep *healing, releasing, proclaiming and comforting* those we meet with Jesus' Saving, Good News.

My dear brother priests, let me first address you, my closest collaborators in the mission entrusted to us, and you who provide sacramental, pastoral, charitable and evangelical ministry to those entrusted into your care, in union with me and in the name of Jesus' Church.

On the day we were ordained as priests----some of you longer ago than I was, most of you much less so, and many of you just recently----we all knew and embraced what it means to be a priest. I'm quite sure that over the years of your priestly ministry, you've come to a different, and I hope more profound, understanding of what being a priest of Jesus means in this culture, which in many ways seems deaf to the Word, Who is Christ, and uninterested in the ways of God.

However, in these last weeks, when we have all experienced the forced separation from the very people we were sent to serve, and when we are unable to do what we have come to know, almost as second nature, to be our priestly activities in the midst of hectic parish schedules, we have ALL had to ponder again what it means to be a priest in these days of quarantine, closed churches, being unable to celebrate the Sacraments as needed, and when we might feel like our preaching and pastoral care is limited to what can be done electronically.

Listen to these beautiful words of Pope St. John Paul II when he was speaking about Priesthood: *“The priestly vocation is a mystery. It is the mystery of a ‘wondrous exchange’ between God and humanity. A man offers his humanity to Christ, so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation, making him as it were into another Christ.”*

Dear brothers, this “mystery” is one that perhaps we never fully comprehend, and one that we are always needing to ponder anew, with every year of ordination, with every new assignment, in the midst of the joys and sorrows of our priestly ministry, in the face of our personal triumphs and our occasional defeats, as we grow in heroic virtue, and even when we sometimes fall under the weight of sin.

And then, on top of it all, throw in a once-in-a-lifetime global coronavirus health crisis---well, that tends to stop us in our tracks, and we’re faced with not being able to “do” what we were ordained to do.

And so, not only do we ponder what it means to be a priest, but in these days, we have to ponder: what does it mean to be a priest in the midst of a pandemic?

We still go back to our basic understanding that we all had on the day of our ordination, and what Pope St. John Paul reminded us a little further on in his beautiful reflection when he wrote: *“In our world, there is no greater fulfillment of our priesthood than to be able to represent every day in persona Christi the redemptive sacrifice, the same sacrifice which Christ offered on the cross.....There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist.”*

Even now, when we all grieve that we can not celebrate the Sacraments for, and with, our people, and especially when we can not make available to our people the Gift of the Eucharist to be their spiritual Food and Drink, we can, and must, regularly celebrate that mystery of Love on their behalf with renewed fervor.

The Eucharist remains essential to us and to the Church, even in this time when our people are separated from receiving the Eucharist.

As priests, we are “Pontifex”---the bridge-builders---we stand in the middle, between God and our People, helping to bring God’s Word to them, and bringing their needs, hopes, dreams, and sins to God.

In just a few moments, I will ask you to each renew the Promises you made so fervently on the day of your ordination, 2, 20, 50 or more years ago. Please try to make them just as fervently, intending your "I Am" to be what Jesus wants it to be, given the circumstances we're in right now, and for however long this "separation" lasts; but also in whatever new ways Jesus might be asking you to renew your fervor when we return to some "normalcy".

And please, dear brothers in Christ, and sons in the Lord, keep your own Faith in Jesus strong, be faithful to your daily prayer, make your regular Holy Hour, offer the Eucharist each day for those who are unable to receive it, pray for and support one another, and pray intently for the needs of all your people, for whom you remain *in persona Christi*.

And now, dear members of the Lay Faithful, my sisters and brothers in Christ, I ask you too to renew your own commitment to be joyful and faithful followers of Jesus, even in these crazy, bizarre circumstances we're experiencing.

These are scary times. I too have those moments when fear grips me as well. This is an "unknown" that no one has ever known before. I'm confident that those who are much smarter than I am, or many of us are, will eventually be able to free us from this very powerful virus, and we will be fine. But in this crisis, we need to stay strong in our Faith. This year's Christ Mass provides us with a new opportunity to think about who we all are, most especially in regard to our common vocation as Baptized followers of Jesus.

Your Baptism, and Confirmation, designates you as those Isaiah prophesied about, the prophecy which Jesus fulfilled: you are baptized, and anointed, into the Priestly people of Jesus Christ; your mission is the mission of Jesus---being willing to joyfully and faithfully be "sent to *heal, release, proclaim and comfort*" all those you meet with the Saving Love of Jesus.

To LIVE your Faith in the midst of a culture that allows no room for God, which refuses to acknowledge accountability to God, which wants to live according to their own version of what is Truth, and who puts their own quest for happiness above the needs of others, especially those who disagree with them----that's even scarier than living in the midst of this pandemic.

At the same time, these have not been easy days within the Church as well; we have to deal with ongoing Scandals, and issues that tend to divide us at times into camps. That too adds to a sense of anxiety and a lack of unity.

But, our Baptism, and our Faith, calls each of you to stand up in these scary and anxious times, and be One with Christ, and to find the ways for us to overcome what may at times divides us. Allow this Holy Week to inspire you to follow Jesus with new resolve! Let the Spirit of the Risen Jesus Who lives within you, and rests upon you, empower you to live with Courage and Hope.

At the Easter Vigil or on Easter Sunday, you too will have your opportunity to Renew “priestly” promises, that is your Baptismal Promises. But today, when the priests renew their promises to their vocation, I invite you to also renew your own commitment to be faithful in all the ways that you are being asked to be each and every day.

Even during this time when you are not able to be strengthened by the actual reception of the Holy Eucharist, please stay strong in Faith, and maintain a regular and vibrant prayer life each day.

Today, we celebrate Jesus: Priest, Prophet and King; and we also celebrate the fact that we, baptized into Christ, share in those priestly, prophetic, and kingly qualities---some thru the “priesthood of the laity”, and others of us as “ordained to stand *in persona Christi*”.

May those few of us here, and those many of you virtually present, all of us---lay, religious, deacons, priests and bishop---pray for God’s Holy Church here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. Let us ask God for continued protection and eventual relief from this pandemic. Let us pray for healing from any of our spiritual or physical ailments. Let us pray for a time of great renewal of Faith for our entire Diocese. And let us pray that each of us will be faithful in our daily lives, whatever the circumstances of our lives may be. May Jesus be at the center of our lives. May we welcome Him in our prayers, celebrate Him as soon as we are able to return to the regular reception of the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. And may we see Jesus in all those we encounter in our lives; may we serve those in need with Jesus’ Love and compassion.

May this joyful Chrism Mass, and the Holy Oils and Sacred Chrism---which will be used to baptize people into the Faith, to receive people into the life of the Church, to confirm people in receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, to ordain men to be priests of Jesus Christ, and to help heal and strengthen those who are ill or drawing close to death---help us all to more faithfully follow Jesus, Who gave Himself up for the salvation of the world.

This is what we celebrate as we move forward in this Holiest of Weeks, leading us to Easter Joy. We celebrate the fact that we are the holy People of God; we are the Body of Christ; and we are the “royal priesthood” of Jesus Christ, Whose Life has been given for the salvation of the world.

As St. John reminds us in today’s Reading from the Book of Revelation: *“To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His Blood, Who has made us into a Kingdom, priests for His God and Father, to Him be glory and power, forever and ever. Amen.”*