

July 21, 2020

St. Catherine of Siena Parish

4:00 p.m.

**49th Anniversary Mass of the Establishment of the Diocese of Kalamazoo
Priests' Jubilee Mass and Distribution of Holy Oils**

Beginning of Mass:

Welcome to this important gathering of priests, deacons and Faithful from around the Diocese for a triple celebration: 1) the 49th Anniversary of the establishment of our Diocese; 2) the celebration of all our priests' and deacons' Ordination Jubilees, with particular acknowledgement of two of our priests celebrating their Silver Anniversaries: Fr. Richard Altine and Fr. Mathias Rajain; and 3) the first opportunity we've had since the Chrism Mass three months ago to distribute the Holy Oils which I blessed and consecrated during that Mass.

And so, whether you are here in person, though socially distant from one another, in this holy place of St. Catherine of Siena Parish Church, or with us remotely through "live-streaming," I want to wish you all a very Happy Anniversary, a warm Welcome, and greetings in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, our High Priest and Good Shepherd.

As we prepare to celebrate these Sacred Mysteries.....

Homily:

July 21, 1971 was truly a "red-letter" day for the priests and people living in the 9 counties of southwest Michigan as, formerly members of either the Grand Rapids Diocese or the Lansing Diocese, they became members of the brand new Diocese of Kalamazoo, with a priest from Lansing, Bishop-elect Paul Donovan, ordained as the very first Bishop of our Diocese. Over the course of these 49 years, and three bishops later, our Diocese has been making its mark, and establishing our own footprint, as one of the 7 vibrant Dioceses in the Province of Michigan, and as we continue to grow in our identity as a Local Church dedicated to building up the Kingdom of God here in this part of our State. And so today is a day when we can rightfully feel some pride as well as joy in what has taken place here with the help and Grace of God.

As we enter into our fiftieth year, poised to celebrate our Golden Jubilee on this date a year from now, we thank God for all His many blessings. Although this

Year of the Eucharist has not been what any of us hoped for or anticipated when we designated 2020 as a special time to focus on the Precious Gift of the Eucharist, we remain conscious of and grateful for the abundant gifts with which we have been blessed by our generous and loving God.

God has given us the gift of Life, the gifts of Family and Church, the gifts of Religious Liberty, Justice and Equality for all. And He has given us Himself in the Great Gift of the Holy Eucharist. We celebrate all these gifts today, even though we're living in times of great uncertainty in our world, and great division and racial tensions in our country, because our Faith gives us strength, and the Presence of Jesus, through the Sacramental life of the Church, represented by the Holy Oils, blessed at the Chrism Mass but which we are only able to distribute to our parishes today, assures us that the Lord is with us in good times, in bad times, in times of pandemic---at all times!

As grateful as I know we all are for all these gifts, isn't it true that all of us sometimes take these gifts for granted, or even misuse them. That could happen even with such amazing human experiences like the birth of a child, the sacrificial love of family members, friends, and even strangers who help us when we are most in need, or even the beauty of golden sunsets. That can also happen with the amazing spiritual realities of our Faith: the forgiveness we receive from our Merciful God in the Sacrament of Penance or even the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And this taking of these amazing realities of life and Faith for granted can cause us to lose our sense of enthusiasm and zeal for our daily responsibilities, in the carrying out of our ministries, and even in our identity as God's holy People.

As we heard in the first reading from the Prophet Micah (Mi 7:14-15, 18-19), our God is a loving Shepherd Who cares for us, Who pardons our sins and Who has compassion on us especially during difficult times. God never withholds His generosity. He continues to bless us and to urge us to come back to Him even when we are half-hearted or have strayed from the right path. This fact—that God loves us in spite of our ingratitude, our indifference or even our outright defiance of His will for us—should fill our hearts with joy and compel us to boldly proclaim the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ with both our words and our actions!

On this special day of celebrating the nearly 50 years of our Diocese, we also celebrate the Ordination anniversaries of all our priests and deacons, with a special commendation of two of our priests who have faithfully served the Church for 25 years, helping the people they serve to carry out the Mission entrusted to

us by Jesus our Good Shepherd. We have all been blessed by their ministry, and today we joyfully acknowledge their jubilee celebrations. *Ad multos annos Richard and Mathias!*

But in this special Mass, we also acknowledge the fact that our Baptism into Christ challenges all of us to be “joyful missionary disciples of Jesus”, who help to build up the Local Church here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. None of us can do what we are called to do by depending on our own efforts; we all depend on the Grace of God and the great Farewell Gift Jesus gave to His Apostles as we heard in today’s Second Reading: the great commission to go forth and preach, teach and baptize to the ends of the earth, with the assurance that we have the Gift of the Holy Spirit to give us the courage and perseverance we need to carry on Christ’s work here in southwest Michigan.

I believe that the enormous difficulties we have all endured during the past four months of this worldwide and never-before experienced pandemic, and yet aware of the amazing ways that the Church has continued to carry on, have clearly demonstrated how the Holy Spirit is present in our midst. I take this occasion to commend our priests, deacons, diocesan and parish staffs, and our lay leaders for their creativity and dedication in carrying out your ministries to the very best of your abilities. I believe this is the essence of “missionary discipleship”— that we find ways to do what Jesus calls us to do, no matter what roadblocks or other obstacles we encounter “along the way.” This has been the experience in our Diocese for the last 49 years; this has been the experience of the Church Universal throughout our 2,000 year-history!

As we heard in that Second Reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples asked Jesus just before He Ascended when His Kingdom would be established. In a way, they were really asking: is now the moment when You are going to establish the Kingdom You’ve been talking about that will now end all our problems? But Jesus’ answer was: *“It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* In other words they, and all the generations to come after them down to our own generation, have work to do.

Pope Francis reminded us all how we need to do that work in his Homily for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul just a few weeks ago, when he said: “We need lives that manifest the miracle of God's love. Not power, but coherence. Not words, but prayer. Not theory, but testimony. Do not proclaim, but serve. It’s not

about being rich, but it's about loving the poor; not to earn for us, but to spend for others." That's why no matter what the problems are that we face---whatever roadblocks that get put in our way---we cannot lose hope. We can never "close the door to the Holy Spirit" or allow frustration, anxiety or fear to overwhelm us. We are people of confidence in Jesus' Promise that He will be with us always, and as long as we allow the Spirit of God to dwell in our hearts, to pray with us and for us, and to guide our actions as members of Christ's Body, the Church, we will face the future as people of Hope.

As missionary disciples, we are invited to grow in our faith, to be a Church always in the process of being renewed through Jesus' sustaining love in the sacramental life of our Church. As you take back to your parishes today the new Holy Oils, to be used in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick, and as we rely on the life-giving nature of the other Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, and Marriage, and the prophetic preaching of God's Holy Word, we will be ready to face whatever comes our way.

As we all know, we are halfway through our special "Year of the Eucharist". In January, none of us had any idea how this year would unfold. It almost defies belief to realize that in these last four months, most of our people would be denied access to the sacramental life of that great Gift of the Holy Eucharist! And yet, we persevered, and our celebration of The Year of the Eucharist has continued—even intensified—as our desire for physical communion with Christ and with each other has been nurtured by our many acts of Spiritual Communion and prayer, which have motivated us to perform many acts of kindness, mercy and justice to those in need, in spite of these extremely difficult circumstances.

The Gospel reading for today's Mass was chosen especially to remind us what Jesus tells us is the most important of all God's commands, and of all our responsibilities: Love for God and neighbor is all that matters. Regardless of the situations we find ourselves in, including pandemics, political turmoil, racial tension, economic hardship and worries about the future, if we stay focused on the two great commandments—to love God with all our hearts and minds and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves—no power in the universe can harm us. To love God and our neighbor is the Mission we have been given by Jesus, and it flows directly from the greatest Gift He has given us, the Holy Eucharist.

Last November, when I published my pastoral letter *Loving God and Neighbor: Living the Mission of the Eucharist*, I outlined what I called "Christ's Vision for the Future." Allow me to quote briefly from this letter:

“As Jesus selflessly gives Himself, never holding back, to the ultimate measure of giving His life for us, and now giving Himself through the Eucharist, so are we called to share ourselves just as generously, making sure that our Faith in God is the priority in our lives. We are called to be generous stewards of the great Gift Jesus gives us in the Eucharist through gifts of our time, talent and treasure. Through that generous gift of ourselves, we are in some measure giving back to God what He most desires: ourselves. This fathomless Mystery of love is expressed most perfectly in the Eucharist.”

I’m sure we often play that “mind-game” in which we ask ourselves or one another, “what if”? “What if I won a million dollars?” Those kinds of exercises can really be very helpful in helping us to know what is important to us. So, in thinking about our Faith, our Vocations, our Local Church here in southwest Michigan: “What if for the next 50 years we allowed the Holy Spirit to truly set our hearts on fire with love for God and Neighbor? What if we not only believed more deeply in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but also allowed the Eucharist to be our spiritual strength to change our actions and our life goals? What if we were true witnesses to the Presence and Love of Christ in all aspects of our lives, beginning in our homes, passing on the Faith and our Values to our Children, and then to our Neighbors, and to our fellow parishioners? What would we do differently? How would our Diocese look when the 100th Anniversary comes around?” That should not only be a “mind game” or interesting exercise, but I hope and pray that the answers to those questions would be ones that will begin to lead all of us, our parishes and our Diocese to a time of true spiritual renewal.

“To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself,” requires that we let the Holy Spirit come into our hearts, and enkindle in us the fire of His love. If each of us opens our minds and hearts to God in this way, and if we receive the precious gift of Christ’s Body and Blood with genuine reverence and gratitude, we will hear Jesus say to us: *“You are not far from the Kingdom of Heaven”*, as He said to the Apostles in this afternoon’s Gospel passage, and our Diocese’s next 50 years will be a time of unprecedented growth in grace and peace here in southwest Michigan.