

March 30, 2021

6:00 p.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Chrism Mass

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ: may I repeat those beautiful words we heard earlier in this evening's Second Reading from the Book of Revelation as my greeting to you: "*Grace to you, and peace from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness; ...to Him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen*"

We have gathered together here in our Cathedral Church from all over our Diocese for this joy-filled celebration of our annual "Chrism Mass". We gather as priests, deacons with your wives, religious, and lay representatives of each of our 59 parishes, together with me as the Shepherd of this Diocese. But over and above our particular roles or ordained ministries, all of us come together as "faithful witnesses" to "Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness"; it is always to Him that we offer our lives of service as we give him *glory and praise forever*. As that beautiful Reading reminds us so well, Jesus Christ is our focus today, and always. He is "*the Alpha and the Omega*"; He is our past, our present, and our future---"*He Who is, Who was, and Who is to come.*"

The Chrism Mass is one of the most special gatherings of the year. In a particular way, it's a special day for our priests. In a few moments, all our priests will be invited to renew the promises they made on the day of their Ordination---whether that was just 3 months ago as it was for Fr. David Pinto, or 25 years as it is for Fr. Joseph Xavier, or 40 years as it is for Fr. Ken Schmidt, or 50 years as it is this year for me and Fr. Mathew Illakittel, or 60 years for our older brothers Fr. Klingler and Fr. O'Leary, or for any number of years in between. The renewal of our priestly promises is much more than a ritual gesture. The "Renewal of Priestly Promises" has been an integral part of the Chrism Mass, which provides the Holy Oils for the Sacramental life of the Church, for centuries because priests are those primarily entrusted, through Sacred Ordination, with being the instruments through whom Jesus makes Himself present in the Sacraments, which are so essential to all of us.

My brother priests, when we open ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit, and to the effects of God's Grace in our lives, we are able, not only to "receive" the gift of sanctifying Grace for ourselves, but also to "share" the gift of that Grace with others. In addition, by the power of

the Holy Spirit, you, as priests, renew your commitment to collaborate with me, and with one another in our Presbyterate; in addition, we make the effort to develop that same spirit of collaboration with our permanent deacons, and with all the religious and lay faithful of our Diocese. When we renew our priestly promises, we rely not only on the power of the Holy Spirit, but also the prayers of the people we have been ordained to serve. And that's why, an important part of this brief "Renewal of Priestly Promises" also includes me asking all of you, my sisters and brothers in Christ, not only to pray for us, but to pray with us---to join with us as collaborators in ministry with a shared vision, and enthusiasm for the mission we have all received through the anointing of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation.

Besides this being a special day for our priests, then, today is also a special day for our entire Local Church---our beloved Diocese of Kalamazoo. In this evening's First Reading, we heard the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "*The Lord anointed me and sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, and to give them oil of gladness in place of mourning.*" And that prophecy gave voice to the joyful acclamation we prayed in today's Responsorial Psalm: "*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord!*"

And all of that finds its fulfillment in this evening's Gospel which made clear, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the Good News Jesus came to share, and what it means in very practical terms. That's why Jesus proclaimed to His family and friends in His hometown synagogue: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed 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.*" And then He pronounced that prophecy fulfilled in Him.

These very same "*glad tidings*" are what all of us are also sent to announce boldly and joyfully. This same "Good News" is what we—bishop, priests, deacons and lay faithful—have been commissioned to proclaim to the ends of the earth, and more specifically, to the nine counties where we live and serve here in southwest Michigan. What are "the glad tidings"; what is the "oil of gladness"? It is the compassionate Love of God our Father, the healing power of His Son, Jesus, and the unction---the "anointing"---the spiritual soothing provided by the Grace of the Holy Spirit. All of us received that "oil of gladness" on the day of our Baptism/Confirmation; and all of us priests received that same "oil of gladness" on the day we were ordained.

Yes, today we renew our Diocese's commitment to bring "glad tidings" and the "oil of gladness" to everyone. This means we give ourselves wholeheartedly to being messengers of hope and ministers of healing in these troubled times of pandemic, social unrest, cultural divisions, racial tensions, and an erosion of belief in God and practice of Faith in many people's lives. That's why we're all asked to promise, once again, to be "faithful witnesses"----martyrs, if necessary---to the total Gift of Christ on the Cross and to the Hope of the Resurrection.

In a recent Letter to Priests from Pope Francis, as he reflected on the Sacred Chrism that was used to anoint our hands on our Ordination day, he stressed that we shouldn't focus just on our "function" as priests, but for us to represent the "unction" that sets us apart. As he put it, we are "unction not just function". Our ministry involves more than the holy and sacred things we do; it also has to do with who we are as those ordained to serve. We priests are to be holy; men whose whole lives bring healing and hope to our people. That's quite a challenge. But that's why coming together for this Mass every year is so important for all of us---to pray together ---- to support one another--- to remind us that we all need to collaborate with each other.

We know that life has changed in significant ways over this past year. While we're all relieved to see the "proverbial light shining at the end of this pandemic tunnel", and we're all feeling a bit more confident as more and more of us receive our vaccinations, and some of the restrictions affecting our worship life, as well as our social life and ways of living, are lifted---- there's something that tells us that life has changed in ways that may never be the same. There's no "normal" to which we can return. So, how can we stay the same? We can't expect to keep doing what we've always done, or approach our ministries----our ordained/sacramental ministries or our lay catechetical/or other pastoral ministries---in the same ways. We need to adjust---to adapt---to become more proficient with electronic media, social outreach, or figuring out how to go out to meet the people where they are. If they're not coming to church, then "Church" needs to go to them.

I've been talking about that for a while----using that "catch phrase" moving from "maintenance to mission", but which is so much more than a "catch phrase". How do we do that? In many ways we're entering into uncharted waters. We could probably all say our

seminary formation didn't prepare us for that. And yet, that's exactly what it means to be a Priest of Jesus Christ; and that's also precisely what it means to be a "follower of Christ".

We priests have indeed been called to be "shepherds" of our people, following the Model of the Good Shepherd---He who laid down His life for His sheep. However, we have also been called to be "fishers of men". That's who Jesus originally called---and He promised them that if they would leave their fishing nets behind, He would show them how to catch the really big ones---He would show them how to be "fishers of people". To do that means, to borrow one of Pope St. John Paul's favorite phrases, that we need to "cast out into the deep"; it requires us to move beyond what is comfortable, familiar, or the ways we've always done things.

Pope Francis put it in these words when he spoke, just yesterday, to priests and seminarians at the Pontifical Mexican College in Rome: "An ever-deeper configuration with the Good Shepherd awakens in every priest an authentic compassion, both for the sheep entrusted to him, and for those who have gone astray. It is only by allowing oneself to be modeled by Him that pastoral charity is intensified, and no one is excluded from the Church's solicitude and prayer." And this part, I think, is a very important reminder: "This prevents us from secluding ourselves at home, in the office or with our hobbies, and encourages us to go out to meet people, rather than stand still."

All of us are followers of Jesus; we're not passive bystanders. We are called to actively, consciously, intentionally, and joyfully follow Jesus---to be those "faithful witnesses" of the "Faithful Witness". The anointing with Oil of Catechumens and Sacred Chrism that we all received at our Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders means that we too are "sent", as Isaiah wrote in our First Reading, and as Jesus quoted in our Gospel reading: we are "sent", with a purpose; we are "sent", on a mission; we are "sent" to bring this amazing, life-changing Good News of the Risen Jesus to people who are so desperately in need of hearing it, and don't even know it. Fishermen don't sit on their front porch, or even on the dock, and wait for the fish to jump into their nets; neither should we as Jesus' priests, deacons, and lay people sit back and wait for people to come to us.

Above all, to be effective—both as shepherds and as fishers of men—we must be "spirit-filled evangelizers," ministers of Word, Sacrament and Service who are dynamic, enthusiastic

and confident that the Holy Spirit is with us as we strive to serve all God's people no matter how near or far away they are from our comfort zones.

The world has indeed changed, not just because of the pandemic, but for many other reasons as well. That means that we too must change. That doesn't need to be seen in a negative way, nor as a reason for us to worry. In fact, we are faced with an amazing opportunity. We have the Gospel---we are a part of the Body of Christ, the Church---we are empowered with the Holy Spirit of God Himself---we have all been "sent"----all of you by your Baptism, and to all of us by our Vocation. All of us are "faithful witnesses" of Jesus Whom we know, love and serve. We have a mission; and we have the vision. All we have to do----is do it; be good "shepherds" of the people who come to us---willingly go "fishing" for those who long to have, and who desperately need, what we hold dear.

Today's beautiful and joyful Chrism Mass encourages all of us---priests, deacons and lay faithful--- to be messengers of hope and ministers of healing to each other and to all the people we are called to serve, with the tender Love of God the Father, the Good News of the Son, and the soothing oil of the Holy Spirit.

As we joyfully celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit today, and rededicate ourselves to the initiatives that God has begun here during the past 50 years in anticipation of the Golden Jubilee of our Diocese, let us also pray for a new spirit of openness and enthusiasm as we embrace all the wonderful opportunities and new challenges the "post-pandemic future" may bring our way through the next 50 years, and beyond. May we recommit ourselves with confidence to the healing power of the Good News of Jesus that we are called to proclaim.

May God bless you abundantly during the remainder of this Holy Week; may we experience renewed Easter Joy; and may we live as joyful, faith-filled witnesses of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! And why must we do so? Because: "*Jesus Christ has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father. To him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.*"