

Chrism Mass Homily
Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
St. Joseph Cathedral
March 5, 2008

Thank you for coming and celebrating with us this Holy Mass of Chrism. A special welcome to the deacons and religious who serve the Church and people so well in ministry and witness of faith. Thank you to the laity here present and those you represent who through good stewardship in its fullest sense are so essential to our diocese and vibrant parish life. A personal welcome to the religious education and Catholic school students who join us. Pray whether God is calling you to ordained or consecrated life. I especially want to thank my brother priests many of whom have journeyed a long way to be here. I hope after sixteen months as your bishop, brother and spiritual father that you know how important you are to me and to the people of our diocese. In difficult and sometimes unjust circumstances you serve those placed in your care so well. Thank you. Chrism Mass focuses in a unique way on the priesthood and our unity as bishop and clergy in this local church of Sioux Falls, Eastern South Dakota. May that unity grow among us.

Let us acknowledge with special thanks and appreciation those priests who are celebrating significant anniversaries of ordination this year. Father James Joyce and Father James Wolf are celebrating sixty years of ordination; Father John Garvey celebrates 50 years, and Fathers David Janes, Douglas Johnson and Charles Emezie celebrate 25 years. Your patience, prayer and perseverance are an inspiration to us all. We pray and remember in a special way those priests who served in our diocese who have died since we gathered together last year – Father Leo Fox, Father David Keating, Father Ivo Martini, and Father Milton Eggerling, two wonderful Benedictines at Blue Cloud Abbey, Father Julius Armbruster, OSB, and Father Thomas Roznowski, OSB, Sacred Heart Father Anthony Kelly, and Redemptorist Father David Shannon. May they rest in peace. We also pray for and remember in a special way those priests who are struggling this day spiritually or physically. May Our Lady watch over them. We are one family and care about one another. When one of us aches we all do, when one rejoices we all rejoice.

The eyes of all looked intently on him, Luke's Gospel tells us after Jesus sat down in the synagogue. What were they looking for, why intently? He was a hometown boy who spoke with authority. He was fully human and fully divine. The human person they knew, the divine presence they did not recognize but seemingly made them wary. Scripture tells us that while at first intrigued by Mary's son, they soon drove him out of town. They did not like what they saw. No prophet is without honor except in his native town.

We priests are privileged to act *in persona Christi*, we are instruments of Christ. In this privileged role the eyes of all look intently on us. What are they looking for; what do they see?

They are looking I think for men who live with fidelity the words of the Commitment to Priestly Service we will soon affirm: “to unite ourselves more closely to Christ and try to be more like him by joyfully sacrificing our own pleasure and ambition to bring peace and love to our brothers and sisters.” They look to see if we are “faithful ministers of God, celebrating the Eucharist and other liturgical services with sincere devotion, imitating Jesus Christ by teaching the Christian faith without thinking of our own profit and solely for the well-being of the people we are sent to serve.” They look to see if we are believers and if we practice what we preach. They are looking for us to live up to the very high calling we accepted.

What do they see? Sometimes it is in the eye of the beholder, out of focus by health or hurt. Sometimes it is expecting the impossible, out of focus by need or dream. But hopefully with charity they see the difficulty of the calling, the importance of accepting certain factual realities and the diversity among us which is present in any family. Hopefully they see that truth is taught with love and that each person is respected from conception through natural death. Hopefully they see the joy that comes from trusting in God’s presence and occasionally getting out of His way. Hopefully they see the willing availability of the sacraments and timely pastoral care. That is a lot for other to see and to expect of priests. Yet because it is hard does not mean we may lower the standards for others or lower the demands on ourselves. It is a tough challenge in our day when the forces of the culture are hostile to what Christ teaches which is what we teach, and the evil one is ever ready to take advantage of our weaknesses and divisions. We have so much more in common than we do differences. Let us not allow discretionary choices to separate us.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in *Your Life is Worth Living*, related to the mystery of the priesthood in terms of Simon Peter. He wrote, *Each one of us (priests) is something like Simon Peter. Remember Simon was the name he had from his family. Peter was the name our Blessed Lord gave him. In each of the priests there is this double nature; the Simon nature we derive from our parents. Our poor, weak, human body, mind and will, this is what God uses. Then there is the Peter nature, the call from God, and the infusion of divine powers, to forgive sins, to be a priest, to renew the sacrifice of Calvary. All the while we feel our great powers, we feel our great weaknesses. We hope the people realize the Simon nature in us must not blind them to the Peter power. (247)*

Sometimes it does. A boy was present when a pastor was writing a sermon. *How you know what to say*, he asked. *Why God tells me*, said the pastor. *Then why do you keep crossing things out*, asked the boy. We do not always listen well. We are human vessels who make mistakes. At least I do. In my time as bishop I have made many by commission and omission. I apologize to anyone hurt or disappointed by them. Bishop Martin Marty, the courageous 1st Bishop of our diocese who sacrificially rode the prairie in the late 1800s, is said to have been caustic and abrupt on occasion. He wrote that “sometimes the wild horse runs away with me.” That may be true of me; it is a weakness not limited to the ordained. We need to know it and own up to it in person and in sacrament, always with forgiving hearts.

I am saddened when I receive a letter from someone complaining about a priest. Sometimes there is justification, sometimes it is unfair. Mostly they can be resolved pastorally. However I am even more saddened when someone writes that because they do not relate to a priest in some way they are now going to a non-Catholic Church or not attending church at all. They have chosen to allow the Simon nature of the priest to blind them to the Peter power and thereby deprive themselves of Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist. Let us pray for all those who have fallen away from the Church for whatever reason and do what we can to welcome them home again.

Sometimes we priests allow our Simon nature to blind us to the awesome gift and responsibility of living the divine call fully, sacrificially and humbly. At least it is true of me. I am an introvert by nature. It takes a lot of energy to be so public a person. Surely there are times when I draw back and am not as present as I ought to be, including to you my brother priests. The Simon nature, our human nature requires care. We need adequate time for rest, recreation, sustenance in its many forms and friendships. However sometimes we can also use that need as a protection from opening ourselves to the expansiveness of responsibility we accepted through Holy Orders. The priesthood is serious business because it affects not only the salvation of souls of others but also of our own. May our Simon nature not blind us to the Peter power we hold in trust.

Pope Benedict in this years Lenten address Christ Made Himself Poor for You, focused on almsgiving with words that apply to all of us in all ways. He wrote *In His school, (in Christ's school) we can learn to make of our lives a total gift; imitating Him, we are able to make ourselves available, not so much in giving a part of what we possess, but our very selves.* We priests are called to give our very selves to Him through His Church. He does not expect the impossible; he does expect our faithfulness. That is what those who look at us intently expect. That is what we privileged to be priests are called to do and be.

What does it take to do so? There is no complicated formula, just prayer, faith based humility and the consolation of the Blessed Mother Mary. Mary reflects the first two. Archbishop Sheen also told the story about Jesus surprised by some who were in heaven. He said to St. Peter: *I have given you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. How did these souls get here.* Peter replies, *don't blame me Lord, every time I close a door your Mother opens a window.* Our Mother may open a window for us.

As we priests now affirm our commitment to priestly service I ask all gathered here to pray silently that we may be grounded in prayer, filled with deep faith and humble awe for our calling, and be open to the Blessed Mother, the model of discipleship, to watch over and intercede for us.

Let me close with a pray of St. Thomas a Kempis that calls us all, clergy, consecrated and lay, to unity in Our Lord: Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know, to love what I ought to love, to praise what delights Thee most, to value what is precious in Thy sight, to hate what is offensive to Thee. Do not suffer me to judge

according to the sight of my eyes, nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of the ears of ignorant men; but to discern with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual, and above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of Thy will. Amen.

Give Praise to the Lord.