



Mass of Chrism
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
March 10, 2016
Prayed on Thursday during the Fourth Week of Lent
Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Thank you for praying with us this Chrism Mass. Each year the clergy of every diocese whoever they are and whatever their merits and sins gather around their bishop, whoever he is and whatever his merits or sins, in a prayerful and symbolic affirmation of solidarity with one another and reaffirmation of faithfulness to the Roman Catholic Church instituted by Jesus Christ. It is an act not to be taken lightly; it is also sign of hope. I am unworthy to be a bishop as you know so well, yet proud to be yours.

While we focus in a special way on the priesthood today it is always a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge the importance of all vocations and all roles in Christ's Church. So thank you to permanent deacons for your ministry of service and charity. Thank you to the consecrated and religious for your ministry of prayer and witness. Thank you to the laity for your commitment to family life and carrying the love and mercy of God as expressed through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into the public square. We are one body with many parts: all important, all essential and all sacred.

As we come together we remember those ordained who have died this past year, Father Douglas Johnson, Abbot Alan Berndt OSB, and Deacon Jeffrey Kowitz. May they rest in peace.

Today we also raise up those priests and deacons who are celebrating significant anniversaries of ordination this year. Fifty years as a priest is Father Bill Osborn. Celebrating 25 years of priesthood is Father John Rader and Father Jerome Ranek. Celebrating 25 years as permanent deacons are Deacon Ed Gruhot, Deacon Harold Pardew, Deacon Thomas Vogel and Deacon Barry Wagner. We also must acknowledge the 25 year anniversaries of the deacon's wives; it truly is a family vocation. All of you have touched the lives of so many over those years, most known only to those who have been so blessed. May God reward you.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me¹" the prophet Isaiah and Our Lord declare in the sacred Scriptures just proclaimed. How appropriate is that reference to the Father anointing with the Spirit at this Chrism Mass when we priests who also have been anointed *in persona Christi* reaffirm our ordination promises and where we prepare the oils for future anointing in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick and holy orders.

Those Scriptures remind us that our anointing is not a recognition of a special place for us as individuals but rather for the purpose of being with others as instruments of Christ in their special place, with the lowly and poor, the broken-hearted and those who mourn, captives and prisoners, and those who are blind and cannot see in all ways.

We processed into Mass this morning through the Door of Mercy as a reminder of this Jubilee Year of Mercy. During it Pope Francis has called us all to take special note of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, which in a way is our job description detailing how we should express the power of our anointing in practical and personal ways.

You know them well: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead, counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear wrongs patiently, pray for the living and the dead. Perhaps we might undertake an examination of conscience as to how well we are living out those tasks of ministry.

Among the great treasures of the Church are the powerful, moving and uplifting liturgical rites and prayers. It is worthwhile to reflect occasionally on their inspired words and their meaning in our lives as priests, as deacons, as religious and as laity. They can touch and motivate us all.

In the blessing of the Oil of Anointing of the Sick, we pray “make this oil a remedy for all . . . heal (those anointed) in body, in soul and in spirit”. In the blessing of the Oil of Catechumens we pray, “Bring (those anointed) to a greater understanding of the Gospel and, help them to accept the challenge of Christian living.” In the consecratory prayer for the Oil of Chrism, we pray: “Make this Chrism a sign of life and salvation . . . when (your people) are anointed with this holy oil make them temples of your glory radiant with the goodness of life that has its source in you.”

In the renewal of ordination promises there also are inspired words with great meaning: are we resolved “to renew promises . . . willingly and joyfully pledged on the day of our priestly ordination . . . moved by the zeal for souls.” Renewal of those promises ought to be a resounding recommitment and not simply an annual gesture of memory.

Cardinal Sean O’Malley, whom I have come to know while serving with him on the Board of Trustees of Pope Saint John XXIII National Seminary, met with recently-ordained priests whose memory of ordination remains fresh and asked them what were the challenges and joys they have discovered.

Their answers do not surprise us for they are our own. Among the challenges cited were fewer priests, generational tension among priests and lack of priestly fraternity, high expectations, the consumer mentality and culture of entitlement among the people, chronic complainers and the anti-religion culture. The most cited challenge however was time management.

Their joys will not surprise us either for they too are our own. The greatest joy is the privilege of celebrating the Holy Eucharist. Other joys include ministering the sacraments especially those of healing, reconciliation and anointing of the sick, preaching, preparing couples for marriage and families for baptism, and especially teaching and sharing the faith with youth.

To capture the challenge and joy of being priests, the Cardinal summarized, “Everyone wants a good preacher, great administrator who is also charming. Then he concluded with a message for us as we reaffirm our ordination promises, “By the end of the day people will always admit: we just want a holy priest.”

How can we become and sustain holiness? By embracing the cross. It is by embracing the cross which includes enduring all those challenges, while strengthened by all those joys, so that as weak as we are able to grow in holiness.

It is hard to believe but this is my tenth Chrism Mass as bishop. Each is a humbling privilege.

Let me close with the true story I noted at my first Chrism Mass. It was told by the bishop in Paris in the early 1800s. A young man would stand outside the Cathedral and shout derogatory words at the worshipers, calling them fools and other names. The people tried to ignore him but it was difficult. One day the parish priest went out to confront the young man who objected to everything the priest said to him. Finally the priest said, "Let's get this over with once and for all. I'm going to dare you to do something and I bet you can't do it." "I can do anything you propose, you white-robed wimp" was the retort. "Fine," said the priest, "all I ask is that you come into the sanctuary with me. I want you to stare at the figure of Christ and scream at the top of your lungs, 'Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit.'"

So the young man went into the sanctuary, stared at the crucifix and screamed, "Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit." "Now do it again," said the priest. The young man did so but with a little less intensity. "You're almost done", said the priest. "Do it one more time." The young man raised his fist, stared at the figure of Christ but no words came out. He just could not look at the face of the crucified Christ and say that he didn't care.

The bishop concluded the story by saying: "I was that young man. That defiant young man was me. I thought I didn't need God, but found out that I did."

My conversion was not so dramatic but the end result is the same, as I suspect it is for us all. Once it was too much about me. Now, by the grace of God, it's about Christ, though each day is a new conversion challenge to be a holy priest. Christ died on the cross for me, and for you. And I do care. Don't we all?

¹ – Isaiah 61: 1-3;6;9-9