



Mass of Chrism
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
April 3, 2014
Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Thank you for being here as we celebrate the annual Mass of Chrism.

While this Mass focuses especially on the vocation of priesthood, we offer a special recognition to the deacons and consecrated religious who so beautifully serve the Church and people in ministry and witness. Thank you also to the laity who share in the common priesthood. Today you are called in a heightened way to exercise your baptismal promises in the public square by announcing and defending your Christian discipleship as government seeks to weaken both our freedom to exercise our faith and to express it in our everyday living.

We also take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank those priests who are celebrating significant anniversaries of ordination this year. Father Pius Mardian - 70 years; Father James Joyce, 66 years; Father Jim Bream, 50 years; and Msgr. Charles Mangan, Father Richard Baumberger and Father James Friedrich 25 years – together 261 years of priestly ministry. Your patience, prayer and perseverance are an inspiration to us all.

Since our last Chrism Mass no priests have died, praise the Lord. Yet we do remember in a special way those priests who are in ill health physically or spiritually. Let us pause to remember them. May they know that Our Lady is present to them. We are one family and we care about one another. When one of us aches we all do, when one rejoices we all rejoice.

It is significant symbolically and practically what we say and do at this Mass of Chrism. First the priests gathering with the current custodian of the office of bishop symbolically reflects the unity that is essential to provide for and support the faithful as Christ calls us to do and we committed to at our ordination. The fact is that the priests need a bishop and the bishop needs the priests, and both need to be true to their ordination promises. Today before the bishop each priest renews his promise of priestly service. I need that reminder.

Secondly two oils will be blessed and one consecrated. These are essential as we exercise our priestly ministry in the name of Christ, “the anointed one.” As the Catechism puts it:

The anointing with sacred chrism (at baptism) signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized who has become a Christian, that is one anointed by the Holy Spirit, incorporated into Christ who is anointed priest, prophet and king.¹ The pre-baptismal anointing with the oil of catechumens signifies cleansing and strengthening; the anointing of the sick expresses healing and comfort. The post baptismal anointing with sacred Chrism in confirmation and ordination is the sign of consecration.²

These oils are rich in fragrance and meaning.

Last when we gathered for the Chrism Mass, we were glued to the television for the impending election of a new Pope, after the startling and courageous decision of beloved Benedict XVI to resign. There was controversy about his prayerful decision, but in the first year of Pope Francis we have seen that the hand of the Holy Spirit was working through the Pope Emeritus and does now through his successor. The role and impact of the Successor of Peter is enduring.

Later this month Pope John XXIII who called Vatican Council II and Pope John Paul II who attended all the sessions and then sought to assure that the true Spirit working through the Council and its documents were appropriately understood, taught and followed, will be canonized, be publicly recognized for what they already are, saints. They as all canonized saints can be models for us all.

Among the common characteristics of these – Good Pope John and John Paul the Great - were a realism based on personal experience especially remembering their humble roots, war and oppression, an optimism based on deep and trusting faith in God and devotion to Our Lady, and a sense of humor. Practical realism, faith based optimism and humble humor are key to being good pastors. Pope John recognized the changes that the world was experiencing and called on the Church to read the signs of the times, not to compromise or change the teachings of Christ, but to present them in a way that would resonate in his day. Pope John Paul II recognized how hard it is to live countercultural Christian discipleship that Catholics must do in current times by repeating in word and witness the call of our Lord to “Be not afraid.” Pope Francis continues their mission as did Benedict before him.

Despite the heaviness of their day, humor sustained them and those around them. Among the most often quoted words of Pope John was his response when asked how many work in the Vatican, and he said about half. When he visited the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome he was greeted by the Mother Superior who said, “Most Holy Father I am the superior of the Holy Spirit,” “Well,” reportedly the Pope said, “I must say you are fortunate, I am only the Vicar of Jesus Christ.”

Pope John Paul II traveled the world like no other. How can we forget when in his healthy days his gesture of kissing the ground wherever he landed? One bishop with him on one trip reported that as he was coming down the stairs from the plane, youth were singing – “Alle Alle Alle Luia.” With a twinkle in his eye he commented “ah, they are singing a beer song.” Nor can we forget in his physically declining days his model of suffering as prayer.

Each of them was and we ordained are public representatives of Christ’s Church. I find haunting the words of Luke’s gospel after Jesus read Scripture, “The eyes of all looked intently on him.”³ What were they looking for, why intently? Scripture tells us that while at first they were intrigued by Mary’s son, they sought to drive him out of town. They did not like what they saw. In our day with the radical secularism, hedonism, extreme individualism, scandal in the Church and attacks on our freedoms, eyes are intently on us. Like Jesus we must stay strong and persevere, being true to our baptismal and vocational promises even when others seek to drive us away.

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?

I have borrowed this notion before, but Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in Your Life is Worth Living, related 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)

Pope John XXIII put it this way:

From the day I was born, I thought of nothing else than to be a priest. Thus was the humble son of the people installed in the admirable office which redounds to the benefit of the people. The priest is there for the comfort and enlightenment of souls. He can discharge this charge because he himself bears the weight of human frailty.⁴

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. May the Peter power not blind us to our Simon nature. This I preach to myself.

The story is told of Father Tony who was a missionary in Africa for many years. He developed abdominal cancer. He was upbeat about it, had surgery which seemed to have been successful and returned to his ministry. After a few years though his cancer returned; it was clear that he had only a short time to live. He recalled one day that he had been lying in bed trying to pray but finding it hard. As he gazed at the body of Christ on the crucifix the eyes of Christ began to glow and looked directly at him. Suddenly he found himself on Calvary just as Jesus was being crucified with the soldiers hammering nails into Jesus hands. He was shocked to see that the face on one of the soldiers was his. Had he been that terrible he asked the Lord. He didn't believe he had done anything horrible, but wondered if his sins were crucifying the Lord. Jesus looked at him from the cross and said “Tony, whatever they are, your sins are forgiven. My peace I give to you.” Then his face left that of the soldier and he awoke. Ever since he said, ‘I have found this enormous peace, the peace that’s in the Gospel, that Jesus spoke about.’”

As he was dying he greeted his family including his parents who were of course distraught. He said to them, “I’ve only a few minutes left. I have one dying wish for you. My wish is the peace that I have enjoyed from knowing that Jesus not only died for my sins but that he loves me with such an incredible love. At this point in my life I’m looking forward to seeing once more this Christ who loves me so much and gives me such peace.” A few minutes later he died, with a big smile on his face. (Bausch)

We are called to live out our vocational promises, we are called to use the sacraments and the sacramentals, Scripture and prayer discretely to help open the hearts and minds of all. We are called to trust the Church and be true to the teachings of Christ she offers and protects. But most especially we are called by our words, actions and witness to pray that those whose lives we touch experience the peace that comes with knowing that Jesus died for our and their sins and loves with such an incredible love. They are looking intently at us.

Pope John Paul II recalled that after his agony in the garden ready to face his passion, Jesus said to those disciples who were with him, “Rise, let us go on our way.” “Not only He “must be on his way” to fulfill his Father’s will, but they too, must go with him.”

We too must go with him. As the saint concluded “He will accompany us as we journey toward the goal only he alone knows.”

My brother priests let us rise, renew our promises of priestly service, knowing Our Lord will accompany us toward the goal he alone knows.

¹ – CCC 1241

² – CCC 1294

³ – Luke 4:20

⁴ – The Wit and Wisdom of Good Pope John, John XXIII, 1964