



Chrism Mass Homily
April 6, 2011
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
St Mary Church, Sioux Falls

Thank you for coming this evening and celebrating with us this Holy Mass of Chrism. I especially welcome and express appreciation to the deacons and their wives, and to the religious who serve the local Church of Sioux Falls so well in a variety of ministries and who witness their faith so beautifully. Thank you also to the lay men and women present here tonight and those you represent. You are essential to assuring vital and vibrant parishes; though our vocations are distinctive we are one in the Church. Thank you for your generosity in so many ways.

I offer a special welcome to the religious education and Catholic school students who join us. You will see the Church in symbol and prayer in a unique way tonight. The Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick will be blessed, and Sacred Chrism Oil will be consecrated. This sacred chrism oil will be used at some of your confirmations, at ordinations and for the dedication of the new altar at St. Joseph Cathedral in July. The priests of the diocese, your local shepherds, will reaffirm their ordination promises. As you observe these beautiful rites and listen to the powerful words of prayer and commitment, open your hearts to the Holy Spirit and ask God what He wants you to do with your life, what is your vocation. Surely some of you he is calling to the ordained or consecrated life. Respond to his call.

I especially want to thank my brother priests many of whom have traveled some hours to be here. Your sacrifice is appreciated not just tonight but every day. We remember in a special way Father John Fisher who is celebrating his 25th anniversary of ordination. We also recall those who have died since we last gathered, Father Leonard Fox, Father Thomas Connolly and Deacon Francis Graff.

Lent is a time for reflection and repentance. As I have reflected on this past year I have recognized the many times I have not been the spiritual father you deserve. Please accept my apology; I will try to do better in the future. As priests of Jesus Christ we must work together to serve those placed in our care. As brothers in Christ we need one another as family. To serve and fulfill that need we must be united, respecting our diversity and unique gifts, always filled with compassion and ready to forgive, but also always grounded in the norms and teachings of the Church instituted by Christ.

In a way that is what we reaffirm tonight. In the beautiful tradition at Chrism Mass priests of a diocese gather around the bishop as the apostles gathered around Christ at the Last Supper. One of the promises we priests and deacons make at our ordinations is respect and obedience to the current bishop and to his successors. At the time of course we do not know the successors, the persons with whom this commitment will be lived out. Obedience is not a matter of power held by a man over another; it is an openness to do God's will as reflected through a man who despite his frailty is given the task and the grace to do so through the sacrament of holy orders.

Pope Benedict XVI has noted, "Obedience is an unpopular word in our day. Obedience appears to be alienation, a servile attitude. One does not enjoy one's own freedom, one's freedom is subjected to another's will, hence one is no longer free but determined by another . . ." Then he notes that obedience and freedom actually go together. "Christ's obedience is the conformity of his will with the will of the Father; it is bringing the human will to the divine will, to the conformation of our will with God's will... Obedience, namely conformity to God, the truth of our being, is true freedom, . . . let us," he urged, 'really pray the Lord help us see closely that this is freedom and thus enter joyfully into this obedience and into "taking hold" of human beings in order to bring them by our own example, by our humility, by our prayer, by our pastoral action into communion with God.' (Lectio Divina to Roman Priests, Feb 18, 2011)

Obedience, conformity to God, is true freedom. Do we my brothers believe and live that? It is a question I ponder personally as I face the pressures and lures of the secular culture and the desire to be liked and to avoid the hard. Pope Benedict XVI also recently urged us priests to proclaim "the entire plan of God. This is important," he said. "The Apostle does not preach Christianity 'a la carte', according to his own tastes, he does not preach a Gospel according to his own preferred theological ideas; he does not take away from the commitment to announce the entire will of God even when uncomfortable, nor the themes he may least like personally. It is our mission to announce all the will of God, in its totality and ultimate simplicity." (Lectio Divina to Roman Priests, March 10, 2011)

Permit me to indulge in a personal remembrance because I have at times been among those who have been hesitant to proclaim the entire plan of God. Bishop William Henry Bullock was the third bishop of Madison, a successor to whom I had promised respect and obedience without knowing who he would be. He died Sunday and I will preach at his funeral tomorrow. I would come to know him well serving in many assignments including seven years as Vicar General. Quite frankly he tested my promise of obedience on a number of occasions, and I am better because he did. Because of those assignments and his confidence in me he had something to do with my becoming your bishop. You can talk among yourselves as to whether he deserves thanks for that or not.

Bishop Bullock was privileged to have had a trinity of appointments from soon to become blessed John Paul the Great. He told of two incidents that continue to influence me. Bishop Bullock met alone with Pope John Paul II on his first ad limina visit. Overwhelmed to be in the presence of the Vicar of Christ, he said to the Pope, "I am just a poor farm boy from Maple Lake, Minnesota." The Holy Father responded something to the effect, "And I am just a poor boy from Poland, yet Christ has called us both." They both responded to the call to discipleship wherever God led. My brother priests, that is our call as well. In fact it is the call of all believers.

When he was Bishop of Des Moines the Pope's representative in Washington, Archbishop Cacchiavillan, informed him that the Pope was appointing him Bishop of Madison. Bishop Bullock was taken aback and he responded, "I have been here only a few years and I am about to turn 67." The archbishop responded: "John XXIII was 78 when he became pope; do you think you can handle Madison?" He responded to the call to service wherever God led. My brother priests, that is our call as well. In fact it is the call of all believers. His witness came to my mind when I received the call to come to South Dakota never having been here before. I am grateful to having said yes to that call in my own life.

Peter is an important icon for how we as weak human beings can respond to that call despite our human limitedness. As Scripture relates, he promised to be faithful and then denied our Lord. St. Ambrose wrote these profound words about Peter's recognition of his failure to be obedient to his call and how he was healed. St. Ambrose wrote:

“Peter became saddened and cried because he erred like all men. I cannot find what he said; I find only that he cried. I read his tears. . . I discovered why Peter remained silent: so that asking for forgiveness so quickly, he would not increase his guilt. First we must cry, then we must pray, Excellent tears, so that they cleanse the guilt, Indeed, those who see Christ’s gaze begin to cry. Peter denied him a first time but did not shed a tear, because the Lord’s gaze did not meet his; he denied him a second time and did not shed a tear, because the Lord’s gaze had not yet come upon him; he denied him a third time, Christ’s gaze fell upon him, and he cried bitterly. Gaze upon us, Lord Jesus, so that we may learn to cry for our sins.” (Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, 10, 88-90 quoted in Lent and Easter with the Church Fathers, p. 33):

My brothers, let the Lord gaze upon us, that we might cry for our sins and that we might be healed so that we can be obedient to his will. Only with our welcoming his gaze upon us can we be worthy shepherds of those placed in our care.

In the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he went to his sleeping apostles and said to them, “Rise, let us be on our way.” His way was to face his passion and death and ultimate glory. His way was to be their way, and our way.

The story is told of a boy who regularly came home from school late with no reason or explanation which caused his parents to worry. Finally his father told him that the next time he came home late all he would have for dinner was bread and water and nothing else. “Is that clear, son,” he asked. The boy nodded.

Several days later the boy came home even later than before. His mother met him at the door and said nothing. His father met him in the living room and said nothing. As they sat down for dinner the boy hungrily noticed that his father’s plate was filled with food as was his mother’s. But on his plate was a single slice of bread next to which was a glass of water. This was the punishment he had been warned about.

The father waited for the full impact to sink in, then quietly took the boy’s plate and placed it in front of himself. He took his own plate filled with food and put it in front of the boy. The boy understood what his father was doing; he was taking upon himself the punishment that he had brought by his disobedient behavior. Years later, that boy recalled that moment and said, “All my life I have known what God is like by what my father did that night.”

Fathers, Our Lord calls us to obedience to His will. He says to each of us, rise, let us be on our way. May we not shy away from his gaze but rather seek it as hard as it is sometimes. Let us by witness and word proclaim the entire plan of God. For then we will be truly obedient, fully healed and therefore truly free.