



Mass of Chrism
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
March 19, 2015
Prayed on the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Thank you for praying with us today as we celebrate the Chrism Mass. Two years ago we did so on the day Pope Francis was selected. Last year we did so in the midst of a winter storm. So, it is comforting to be here today on a placid, though chilly, South Dakota March day.

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 humbled to be a bishop, yet proud be yours.

In our diocese we also note with grateful hearts those priests and deacons who God-willing passed on to eternal life in the past year. Today we thank God for and pray for the repose of the souls of Msgr. Marvin McPhee and Father Leonard Kaiser. May they both rest in peace.

We also honor those celebrating significant anniversaries of ordination. This year our thanksgiving basket is overflowing. Celebrating 25 years are Father Mike Griffin and Father Ken Bain; celebrating 50 years are Msgr. Edward Burian and Msgr. Joseph Wagner; celebrating 60 years are Father John Brady and Msgr. Richard Mahowald, and celebrating 65 years ordained is Father Al Krzyzopolski. Together that is 335 years of priestly service. How many thousands of lives have been touched and healed because they said “yes” to the call of Christ to follow Him wherever he led? May their witness inspire others, especially in our diocese, to respond to the call of Christ to follow him as priests, deacons and religious.

At every Chrism Mass we undertake two symbolic and practical tasks. We priests reaffirm the promises we made at our ordinations, and we consecrate the sacred oil of Chrism and bless the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumens. This year we are privileged to do so on the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of Mary, here in the Cathedral of Saint Joseph, calling on Saint Joseph as the patron of our Diocese to intercede, protect and guide us.

On retreat earlier this year I re-read the book by Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen written in 1963, [The Priest Is Not His Own](#). Archbishop Sheen influenced my conversion journey not only by his powerful words but by his presence. He was Bishop of Rochester for a time; my birthplace is in that diocese. The main thrust of his encouraging message in this book is that if we priests are to faithfully live out our vocation we must imitate Christ as both priest and as victim. He wrote: “We priests are not only shepherds, but also lambs. Was not Our Lord not only the Good Shepherd but also the Lamb of God?”

He posed this intriguing question: “Why is it that Our Lord chose us who are so weak? Each of us knows many who would have been more responsive to the grace of ordination. It would be an insult to Divine Wisdom to imagine ourselves as the best material available.” That certainly applies to bishops, at least this bishop. He answered the question by saying we are set apart: because we know and experience the sympathy, the compassion, the suffering together, because we are priest victims, we know what only one who has suffered knows.

He also wrote: “. . . (O)ur High Priest has given us an example of human sympathy, for he wept three times: once for human grief, misery, desolation and death, at the tomb of Lazarus; once for a city, a civilization, a decaying culture, a rotting government and corrupt priests, at Jerusalem; and finally for human sin, pride, greed, egotism and all that catalog capital evil, at Gethsemane. . . Their grief is our grief, their poverty our poverty.” We are shepherds and we are lambs.

Archbishop Sheen identified these seven characteristics as essential to our priest/victim calling and living out our ordination promises. They may apply as well to deacons and laity.

1. Recognize that all good that results from our ministry comes only from God; we are instruments only.
2. Mass must be the center of our own spiritual lives, not only an appointment on our busy schedule.
3. Humility must underscore our privileged role, pride is the enemy’s tool to our fall.
4. Love the Church, despite her imperfect human leaders, for she is one, holy, catholic and apostolic as instituted by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit.
5. Every priest is an alter Christus as imaged in the cross, having vertical relations to Christ in heaven and horizontal relations to men on earth; it is not about us.
6. As brothers in Christ priests ought to be charitable toward one another and those we shepherd; mercy should guide us as Pope Francis emphasizes again and again.
7. We must own up to our own sinfulness if we are to be worthy confessors and shepherds to others.

On this Solemnity, how might the vocation of Saint Joseph help us live out our own vocations? The fact is that we know little about him and yet feel close to him. While we know his lineage of the House of David, we know nothing about his birth or early years, only mostly by speculation is his life in Nazareth discussed, no words are attributed to him in Scripture, nor is his death recorded. There is however on the ceiling above the Saint Joseph altar here in this Cathedral, a moving and tender expression of the Holy Family’s love at that last, earthly moment.

We know so little and yet we seem to know so much about him from his quiet presence in Nazareth protecting the reputation of Mary, his gentle presence in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, his courageous presence on the journey to Egypt as refugees, his anxious presence in the Temple when Jesus was seemingly lost, his loving presence as spouse to Mary and his fatherly presence to Jesus as he grew in age, wisdom and grace. Saint Theresa wrote: “Will not the remembrance of the little arms once twined around his neck, the little hands held in his with loving confidence, rouse us to confidence and love?”¹

Perhaps what we might learn from Saint Joseph is fidelity to promises made, openness to God's will, love of family including extended family, all expressed in the beauty of his silence. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI when he visited St. Joseph Seminary in New York, perhaps recalling the dreams Joseph experienced, encouraged the seminarians to ask "Lord what are you whispering to me?"² Perhaps that is what his vocation can offer us, in silence ask Lord what are you whispering to me that will allow me to be worthy of your call to be shepherd and lamb.

In a few minutes we priests will reaffirm our promises made at ordination and ask for prayers that we be more united with Jesus following Christ the Head and Shepherd moved only for the zeal for souls.

As bishop I also ask for your prayers that I will be faithful to my office each day, become a living and more perfect image of Christ, Priest, Good Shepherd, Teacher and Servant of All. For those times I have not been faithful or have disappointed you I ask your forgiveness. May all of us recall the joy of our ordination day and with sincerity and grateful hearts renew the promises we made, surrendering ourselves to His will with zeal for souls.

Saint Francis reportedly told his friars that if he saw an angel and a priest walking together he would salute the priest first because, although great is an angel it is only God's servant, while a priest represents Christ.

Saint Joseph, pray that we may with humility and courage represent Christ well as priest and victim, as shepherd and lamb, knowing that a priest is not his own.

¹ – The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux With Additional Writings and Sayings of St. Thérèse

² - Pope Benedict XVI, address to seminarians at St. Joseph Seminary, Yonkers, NY, April 19, 2008