



Chrism Mass Homily
Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
March 24, 2010
St Mary Church, Sioux Falls

Thank you for coming tonight. The Chrism Mass is a celebration of who we are as church. We are the local church of Sioux Falls, over 35,000 square miles, more than 125,000 Catholics, 150 parishes, 23 schools, with one Cathedral, the mother church, currently being preserved, restored and beautified as a beacon of hope for generations to come. I thank Father Krogman and the faithful of St. Mary for taking us in and welcoming us tonight.

In a few minutes the priests gathered around the bishop will renew their ordination promises, as priests will do throughout the universal church in the days before Easter. Then the sacred oils of chrism, of catechumens and of the sick will be consecrated or blessed. They will then be dispersed throughout the diocese to be used for baptisms, confirmations, ordinations and the sacrament of the sick, a sign that we are one family with many homes.

Chrism Mass focuses on the priesthood, as our readings relate. Yet we do so not in a way that suggests other vocations are lesser ones, only different and distinct. We celebrate married life, single life, religious life and the diaconate. We are one family, one body as St. Paul described the church. We need all of its parts to function in unity with one another if we are to continue the mission and ministry of Christ until he comes again.

Yet tonight we do honor priests and pray for an increase in their number. Without priests, there would be no Holy Eucharist. We especially want to acknowledge those priests who will be celebrating significant ordination anniversaries this year. They include: Father Odilio Burkhardt, OSB, 60 years, Father Al Krzyzopolski, 60 years, Father Don Imming and Father Christopher Uehlein, OSB, 50 years, and Father Richard Fox, Father Paul Nereparampil, CMI, and Father Terry Weber, 25 years. Thank you for your combined 295 years of priestly service. You are inspirations to us. We also with grateful hearts remember those ordained who have died since our last Chrism Mass. They include: Father Robert Fox, Father Donald Molumby, Deacon Richard Bierer and Deacon Edward Zephier. May they rest in peace.

This Chrism Mass is especially meaningful as we celebrate the Year for Priests. When Pope Benedict XVI declared this special year he identified its purpose as "to encourage priests in ... striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends." In the context of the secularism of our day, the culture of death, the sinfulness and scandal that has infiltrated the Church, the lack of civility in public and personal affairs, and the uncertainty of the future, I believe that the need for good and holy priests is especially urgent in our day. A new evangelization is desperately needed. It is our sacred mission. The salvation of souls is at stake. Ours is a high calling and a difficult

one. With this task before us, the difference between a priest filled with the Spirit and a dispirited priest is apparent to all.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan recounted this story: A priest in his home diocese of St. Louis in 1962 had the privilege of an audience with Pope John XXIII. There were about ten other priests present and he was last in line to greet the pontiff. Each of the priests before him introduced himself to the Pope, told him what he did as a priest, and then knelt to kiss the Pope's ring. "I am a university president," the first one reported. "Holy Father, I am chancellor of my diocese," said the next. And so on. As Pope John came to the priest from St. Louis, the priest felt rather low, because he thought his priestly work was hardly as exalted as those nine before him. In almost a whisper, he said, "Holy Father, all I am is a parish priest." Pope John genuflected before him, kissed his hands, and said, "That's the greatest priestly work of all."

Indeed it is. How precious are the souls that are placed in our care. How fragile are we as we seek to serve them with humility and hope. But it is not on our shoulders alone. We are instruments of Christ, not miracle workers. Pope Benedict XVI told priests on his visit to Poland: "The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God. The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction, or politics. He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life." We cannot be so to others unless we are spiritually grounded ourselves. And we must accept the fact that we are not called to be everything to everyone, though the unrealistic expectations of some on what we priests ought to do and how to do it is wearing. We are called to use the gifts we have to be men of the Holy Eucharist, men of and in Christ.

Without spiritual grounding we cannot live up to such a high calling. There is a Trinity of spiritual nourishment that can help us toward spiritual perfection. They are prayer, study and sacrament. That means daily prayer that is more than routine and obligatory, spiritual reading and continuing theological reflection that informs and inspires, and regular reception of the sacraments ourselves while praying and administering them well for others not for ourselves. Without these three, which all come down to relating our lives totally to Christ, we can lose our spiritual strength and motivation.

We can be encouraged by those who went before, the known saints, and those unknown to others who have touched and shaped our lives. They faced tough challenges and persevered in faith. Today is the 30th anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero, killed while celebrating Holy Mass in El Salvador. His life and martyrdom reminds us of our call to seek justice especially for the poor and vulnerable and to respect life in its fullest sense, at conception, at natural death, and all the years in-between.

Pope Benedict has asked us to reflect on St. John Vianney, patron of all priests. He does not expect us to become like this saint who was truly unique, but to rediscover in his priesthood the core of what priesthood ought to be about for us. I have placed here on the altar a relic of the inspirational St. John Vianney which was in the possession of one of our own inspirational priests, Msgr. John McEneaney.

St. John was sent to evangelize a remote village where faith was lacking. Benedictine Abbot Martin Marty, who became the first bishop of Sioux Falls, came from Europe to the Dakota Territory to evangelize those here who did not know of Christ's love and mercy. Others followed to our own day.

You know their names. The need for such personal and sacrificial evangelization is as great if not greater today. What motivated and sustained them? Perhaps we ought to study and model those priests of the prairie in whose legacy we live.

The story is told of a worldly lawyer from Paris who went to Ars to see for himself this priest who was called a living saint. He came back to Paris and began attending Mass, going to confession and living the faith. He was asked “what did that priest say to you that convinced you to begin practicing the faith again.” The attorney replied, “Well, I really could not even understand him. He was not a good speaker and his accent was thick. It was not what he said that changed me. It was what I saw. What I saw was God in a man.” My brother priests, who do others see in us?

And we can be inspired by the Blessed Mother. Tonight is the Vigil of the Annunciation, when the Archangel Gabriel came to the young Mary and told her God has called her to a special vocation, to be the Mother of God, and ultimately the mother of us all. She pondered as do we all, yet she responded with the humility to which we all are called, “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me as you say,” as God wills. That in essence is what we will recommit to in our priestly promises of service.

A retreat master told the story of a priest in the early 1900s who was a circuit rider going on horseback from village to village to celebrate the sacraments, not unlike the early days of our diocese. After celebrating Holy Mass a lady said to him, “Father, have you heard about old man Jones. They say he is dying.” Immediately the priest was lead on horseback many miles to a dilapidated one-room cabin. Inside on a cot was an old, black man with hands calloused from hard work, now emaciated from cancer. He likely had been a slave or a child of slaves. When he saw the priest he exclaimed, “Father, I knew you would come.” The priest heard his confession, gave him Holy Communion, the sacrament of Extreme Unction as it was in those days. He said he heard the dark rasp of death from the man, so he knelt down by the bed, held the man’s hand and prayed the rosary. Suddenly the weak, cancer-ridden man sat up and pointed behind the priest and shouted: “I see the Blessed Mother and she’s smiling at you and me.” The priest turned toward where the man was looking but only saw the darkness. He turned back; the old man was dead. The priest recalled, “I stayed there, kneeling on the floor in darkness and I held that old man’s hands until they grew cold. And I cried, and I thanked God that I was a priest.”

I thank God that I am a priest. We thank God for you the priests of and in the Diocese of Sioux Falls, present and past. I am humbled and proud to be your bishop. May others see in each of us, God in a man.