



Chrism Mass Homily
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
March 13, 2013
Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Good evening. Thank you for being with us tonight as we celebrate the Mass of Chrism. A special welcome to the confirmation students and others from religious education programs joining us. I encourage you to closely attend to this beautiful rite of the Church. It is packed with meaning in gesture, in word and in symbolism.

We come together at an historic moment as we joyfully celebrate the selection of Pope Francis. We are grateful to have a spiritual father once again around whom we can unite as Roman Catholics. His Holiness' election is recognition of the change that has been occurring in the Church for some time with the most significant growth outside of Europe. The selection of the name Francis calls to mind humility, special concern for the poor, and the quest for peace based on respect for life, from conception through natural death, for which he is known in Argentina. On behalf of the clergy, consecrated and laity in the Diocese of Sioux Falls I pledge our respect, obedience and promise of prayer.

There is something reassuring that in the day of smart phones, Facebook, blogs and more that the election of a Pope was communicated by the ancient means of billowing smoke. It is as if our prayers were rising up to God in supplication for guidance and protection of Christ's Church and for the one He has chosen to lead her. Let us pray for our Holy Father:

*O God, who in your providential design willed that your Church be built upon blessed Peter, whom you set over the other apostles, look with favor, we pray, **on Francis, our Pope**, and grant that he, whom you have made Peter's successor, may be for your people a visible source and foundation of unity in faith and of communion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen*

This is also an historic moment in the life of the Church in the United States with the growth of radical secularism in our culture and the subtle yet aggressive war against religious liberty and freedom of conscience to force faith into the back room and eventually out the back door. Sadly that effort is present even within the Church itself and the institutions which claim her as their heritage. That is a subject of another day, but I assure you that we will stand firm for truth and freedom. I ask you to join me in that crusade.

Tonight though we come together to celebrate priesthood and to bless and consecrate the oils to be used in the sacraments. Holy Orders and other sacraments were instituted by Christ to continue his mission and his ministry through His Church until he comes again. Thank you to all who have responded to the call of Christ with your lives.

Let us remember with gratitude those priests and deacons who have passed from this life since the last Chrism Mass:

Father Arnold Petrosky, TOR, Father Dennis Deis, OMI, Father Paul Offerman,
Father Lawrence Friedrich, Father Lawrence Marbach, Father Odilo Burkhardt, OSB and
Deacon Thomas Bates.

May they rest in peace.

Let us also acknowledge the priest jubilarians this year. Celebrating 65 years is Father James Joyce whose ordination anniversary is this very day; 50 years is Father Denis Meier; and 25 years is Father Joji Itukulapati. And there is another one celebrating 25 years of priesthood, yours truly. I was hoping no one would notice, but since you know, allow me a few personal thoughts.

There are various tags placed on those of us ordained a little older in life (I was 44). Sometimes we are called “late” vocations. Better late than never, I think. Sometimes we are referred to as “second career” vocations. I have had at least three careers but priesthood is the only vocation I have had. I thank God for keeping at me to respond to his call, even if “late”.

As I reflect on my 25 years as a priest, a number of thoughts go through my mind. I recall so vividly the ordination Mass that occurred in a Cathedral that I would later as rector watch burn down. Two aspects stand out. One was lying prostrate on the floor while the Litany of the Saints was sung by choir and people. “St. Peter and St. Paul, pray for us . . . all holy men and women, pray for us.” How moving, humbling and reassuring. After 25 years I better realize how much I need the prayers of others, the saints in heaven and those saints in the making here on earth, each of you.

The second remembrance was the homily given by Bishop Cletus O’Donnell which I quote at priestly ordinations mainly to remind me of what he instructed me to be. Suffering with acute diabetes and having attended Vatican Council II and serving as bishop during its aftermath of beauty and turmoil, this seasoned bishop reflected,

“The Priesthood dating back to the earliest of days of the New Covenant, has always been a ministry for the mature, a ministry demanding the best – a service to God’s people. You will exercise this priestly ministry in many ways – liturgically, socially, educationally, and I might add – even prophetically. Thus it is no task for children, for people who are not fully mature. The Priesthood is not a stage for game playing; it is not child’s play. It is serious business and carries with it grave consequences.”¹

Those are sobering words, truthful words.

We priests are called to a variety of tasks – preacher, listener, confessor, teacher, administrator, reconciler, facilitator, pray-er, to name a few. Some assignments include financial wizard, master plumber and the need for the patience of Job.

It is not possible for us to be skilled in all areas; we are simply asked to do the best we can with what gifts God has given us, and seek forgiveness for our mistakes and failings, while empowering the laity to play their appropriate role. Sometimes the demands placed upon us are conflicting, and sometimes the expectations are beyond the possible. Sometimes the disappointments are wearing and criticisms are discouraging. Yet what a privileged calling it is, in large part because of our closeness to the powerful witness of faith of so many who come forward to receive Holy Communion with a trust and sense of hope that inspires and invigorates.

Surveying the people at Mass we see those who wear the burdens of heartache bravely, having persevered in faith. We see those who bear their physical and other crosses with courage and integrity. We see the frailty of those who struggle day by day just trying to cope, those who need the reassurance of a Christ who calls to Him all those who find life burdensome and gives them rest. We priests are privileged to be invited into people’s lives to give that reassurance.

Over the years I have cried with those who suffer for reasons we in this life cannot explain – sickness, loss, accident, abuse inflicted or tolerated, and addictions that control – which challenge the meaning of life and the love of our God and His Church. I have also rejoiced with those who have reconciled with God and family after like the prodigal son they returned home contrite and been uplifted in those special moments of birth, marriage and the family in its fullness.

When I was ordained I thought in terms of celebrating Mass, hearing confessions, witnessing weddings, praying with the sick, preaching the Word. All surface descriptions that emit a sense of doing which is vulnerable to performing and game playing. But now I recognize internally what I knew only intellectually 25 years ago, that to be priest in the Roman Catholic Church requires to personally enter into the Paschal Mystery of Our Lord Jesus Christ, into the suffering of God's people, into death of self and sin, into order to achieve the promised new life Christ offers to those who are willing to pick up their crosses daily, trust in his promise and follow Him wherever he leads.

In my years as a priest in parish life, in diocesan office and recently as bishop, I have learned that it is indeed serious business with grave consequences, and one that requires deep personal and communal prayer which focuses our lives on the Eternal High Priest. Essential is dedication to the Holy Eucharist, in which we have the sacred role of being *in persona Christi* and from which we ought never to take a day off. Essential also is to allow the Blessed Mother to intercede for us.

When I was ordained a priest someone gave me a plaque with these words St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "I thank God for finding me worthy enough to call me into his service." As unworthy as I am, I thank God for calling me into his service 25 years ago in Madison, Wisconsin and over six years ago here in Sioux Falls. Thank you for welcoming me into your lives as priest and bishop despite my weaknesses and unworthiness. Be assured brother clergy, consecrated and laity; be assured of my love, support and prayers for you.

May I conclude with a personal plea: Benedict, Pope Emeritus, as he left office spoke these words to the Cardinals now gathered in conclave:

"In these eight years we have lived with faith beautiful moments of radiant light in the path of the Church, along with times when a few clouds have formed in the sky. We have tried to serve Christ and his Church with deep and total love, which is the soul of our ministry. We have given hope, that which comes to us from Christ, and that alone can enlighten the way. Together we can thank the Lord, who has made us grow in communion; together we can beseech Him to help you grow still in this profound unity, so that the (College of Cardinals) may be like an orchestra, where the diversities, an expression of the Universal Church, may always contribute to the greater, unifying harmony."²

I pray that as we look with faith to the hard yet hopeful future under our new Shepherd Francis, we the local Church of Sioux Falls may be like an orchestra where the diversities may always contribute to the great unifying harmony, in humble obedience to Christ our Lord.

May Mary, mother of the Church, and St. Joseph, our patron, watch over and protect you and those you love and serve.

¹ – Ordination Mass Homily, Most Reverend Cletus F. O'Donnell, May 27, 1988

² – Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, February 28, 2013, Address to College of Cardinals