

Cathedral of Saint Matthew the Apostle  
Washington, DC  
Monday, April 15, 2019, 7:00 p.m.

CHRISM MASS

HOMILY

by

His Eminence  
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Apostolic Administrator  
Archdiocese of Washington

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

I began by greeting you as brothers and sisters in Christ. It helps from time to time simply to stop and reflect on how true and how profound those words are. This is not a casual salutation. The Church deliberately chooses and uses her words to express something very deep, spiritual and not always immediately visible.

The same with her symbols. The Church uses visible realities, oil, bread, wine, water, fire, incense, all to speak to us of something much more powerful and significant, even if unseen. So it is with our celebration today – this Chrism Mass.

It is an occasion not just to bless sacred oils, distribute them for use in the parishes, and invite all of us priests to renew our priestly dedication. It is time to reflect as the Church asks us on her priesthood and its significance.

This year, given the circumstances that have unfolded around us, it is all the more not just opportune but actually necessary that we renew in our hearts the significance and challenges of priesthood and priestly ministry.

Not that long ago, standing at the back of this cathedral greeting people at the end of Mass, a man said to me, “I am praying for all of you – it’s a rough time today to be a priest.” Yes it is!

It is also true that there has never been a time when being a priest was particularly easy. There have always been challenges to living out to the full the ministry each day, to teach, to guide, to sanctify. What makes our uneasiness so acute today is the unfair implication that the Church, herself, her priests, and her bishops, are somehow tainted. This simply is not true.

But there is a woundedness. Today we face something more pervasive that goes to the very core of our self-esteem and therefore questions our capacity to be effective ministers of Word and Sacrament.

The challenge we face today is not so much one of vindication but rather the need for loving healing. My brothers, in what does this healing consist? Where do we turn to find the

means by which trust, credibility, confidence are renewed? Where do we look for the reassurance and joy that has always been a part of our life and priestly service?

I think the answer to those questions – to the question of restoring confidence, ours and our peoples – lies precisely in the fidelity, the dedication and the self-giving that have been and still are the hallmark of the priesthood – the vast majority of our brother priests.

I am convinced that one reason for shock among the faithful whenever priestly or episcopal ministry has failed is because this is not their experience of their clergy. Their experience of good and faithful priests is therefore the reason for our confidence in the healing power of that same ministry.

Is it not true that one reason for the dismay when we encounter any failure is because it is not and has never been the hallmark of the Church's ordained ministry? Priesthood that is and has been beautifully lived in our Church, in this archdiocese, is what has been recognized by the faithful who have been so consistently well served.

The very dismay at any episcopal or priestly failure is in contrast to the goodness, the service, the dedication and the commitment that is what we all rightly associate with our priests and bishops. This Chrism Mass is as much a time to recognize the fidelity of our priests and bishops as it is to lament exceptions to that commitment.

Not that we gloss over any failings. We recognize the importance of "*mea culpa*"! There can be no healing, no rebirth, without contrition. Yet, that same sorrow is the seed of true renewal. Like Saint Peter, we can move through failure and repentance, once again, into confidence Gospel life.

But where do we turn to initiate the healing? Even if the wounding comes from only a few, we must all be a part of the renewal and the binding up of the wound. Where to start?

My brothers, why do we not see in the faithfulness of the ministry of our brother bishops and priests the very anointing balm of healing?

The experience of our faithful has been your self-giving ministry. Whatever the style, personality and giftedness of every priest in this Church, you are and have been and will continue to be the presence of Christ to the Catholic faithful.

First of all, you bring to them the sacramental experience of the death and Resurrection of Christ in every Mass you celebrate.

Every time you hear a confession, offer spiritual guidance, raise your hand in absolution, every time you anoint the sick and dying, and bring words of peace and comfort, every time you preside at a funeral, bury the dead and console and comfort the bereaved, each time you baptize a new member of the Body of Christ, offer words of counsel and draw from your many pastoral experiences or simply listen to the outpouring of pain and the personal difficulty of parishioners all the time you share the joys of being with families as a member celebrates a First Communion, a Confirmation, a graduation, an anniversary you bring them Christ!

My brothers, all of these are moments that the Catholic faithful have come to experience as the loving presence of Christ touching them personally and directly in you.

Once one of you asked me, “Why at priestly ordinations and at the Chrism Mass do you always paint such an ‘exalted picture’ of the priesthood?” The answer is quite simply “Because it is true!”

My brothers, listen to these words taken from the Second Vatican Council’s decree on the priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, and repeated in one form or another by every Pope since, that the priestly office “is conferred by that special sacrament; through it priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ, the Head” (2).

Such a view, vision, understanding of priesthood, should make us all the more aware that it is precisely in this identification, in a unique and special way, with Christ, that we are called just as was Christ to offer our lives, our ministry, our talents, our efforts, precisely as a ransom for others.

My dear brothers and sisters who are present at this Chrism Mass, can you join me in affirming confidence in and love for all of the ordained in this Church? Do we not confirm them as they do their best to be for you what Christ asks them to be?

In a moment, we will renew our priestly commitment their words are their recommitment. Your response is your support.