

Chrism Mass Homily

(The following is the homily given at the Chrism Mass March 18 at the Cathedral of Saint Paul in Birmingham during which priests renew their priestly commitment.)

This annual celebration of the Chrism Mass gives us an opportunity to come together to celebrate as a diocese each year, and this event is special for me this year, as it is my first as your bishop.

This Mass reminds us of the special sacramental character of our Church. Christ is made present, visible, and tangible to us through the sacraments, most importantly through our celebration of Holy Mass, but also through the sacraments that involve the use of the Holy Oils that are used at Baptism, Confirmation, the priesthood, and the Sacrament of the Sick. Four of the sacraments involve the use of blessed oil. The oil used is blessed for those sacred celebrations today.

This Holy Mass is also an occasion for the priests of our diocese and in Religious communities to renew their priestly commitment today in a public way. And that is special for the Church as well. We hear our priests say they are committed to their daily walk with the Lord in prayer and to their dedicated service of their people.

We also invite the prayers of the people they serve, those with us today, and those back in parishes and those involved in the various ministries of our priests. I know I speak for our priests when I say they welcome those prayers lifted up for them daily. I know that I, your bishop, certainly welcome your prayers for me, including the prayer mentioning my name at every Holy Mass.

Prayer is the gas that keeps our spiritual engines running. Without prayer we go nowhere. So, we thank you people that we priests are called to serve, our dedicated deacons, religious sisters and brothers, seminarians, and lay faithful for your many prayers for us and your close collaboration with us.

In a special way I wish to acknowledge priests celebrating special anniversaries this year. (See list below.)

We thank all our priests as well for their continued labors of love for the Lord and all of us, and I personally thank them for their warm welcome to me and their support of Bishop Foley and all the bishops who have served in this diocese.

The priesthood is a precious gift to the Church. Its origin is the Last Supper of Jesus, when He instituted the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, and asked His disciples to do this in remembrance of Him, to carry on the celebration of the mystery of His Divine Presence under the appearance of bread and wine, His body and blood, soul and divinity, truly, really, and substantially present.

The priest, in celebrating this miracle of grace, is establishing a divine connection between himself and Christ and Christ's great work of salvation enacted for all time on Calvary. The priest is given the unspeakable privilege of tying together the time and history of Jesus Christ on Calvary with our own time and history so that redemption is present and visible in our midst in and through the priest.

No human being can fathom the depths of this great mystery, but you and I experience it in every Holy Mass. Without that unique sacrament Christ would not be present in this unique, saving action that transforms lives in uniting them to God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

And without the priest, there would be no Holy Eucharist, no Calvary made present, no Body and Blood of Christ on our altars.

The priest in each celebration not only touches dramatically the mystery of salvation and is linked sacramentally to the most important salvific event of history, but he is linked to everyone present in the church for that celebration of the Eucharist in a unique bonding of love.

As the Father of that Eucharistic family he provides the spiritual bread of life. That is also a sacred, mysterious bond that highlights his importance to the Christian community.

The celibate commitment flows from that bonding. While it took the church several centuries to understand this connection, the celebration of the Eucharist is at the heart of the meaning of celibacy. Only by meditating on the meaning of the celebrant's role in the Liturgy of the Eucharist for a lifetime do we begin to understand this connection, between priesthood and celibacy, the spiritual fatherhood of the Eucharistic celebration and the spiritual fatherhood of the celibate commitment.

The Christ of Calvary is the connector. He is at the heart of this bonding of love between the priest and his people.

When a priest gives his people Holy Communion, he is privileged to share with them a gift he has uniquely been given by God, the gift of Jesus Christ, present in a real way, in the present moment, and the gift also of that human being's priestly commitment to his people's well-being.

That is the reason for the priest's sinful failures in personal relationships are regarded as being in the category of sacrilege. A special sacramental, sacred bonding is destroyed and can only be rectified by the divine healing of Christ in a powerful way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Forgiveness.

How grateful all of us are to our priests! How important it is that we realize their unique role in the plan of salvation! How important it is that we respect them, support them, encourage them, pray for them daily, and yes, sometimes challenge them to rise to the height of their tremendous, our tremendous, responsibility!

I'd also, in conclusion, like to underline the priest's relationship to the Blessed Mother. Mary walks daily with her priests. She is keenly aware of their role in bringing Christ to the world. Of course, they have much in common with her. She bore Christ in her womb. They bear Christ into the world through their calling on the Spirit's action to change the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ and their summoning Christ's presence through the words of consecration.

Like Mary, priests are Christ-bearers, not in the theological sense of Theotokos, but in the theological sense of Christophoros, Christ-bearers.

We as priests need to invoke Mary's help daily, especially through the rosary, a powerful prayer that shatters the power of the evil that surrounds us. Mary is also present at every Holy Mass, praying with her priests and for them.

May Mary guide her priests to her Son always. May she help them find hope and courage in Him. May she help them surmount the obstacles daily in their path, as she did, by placing her Son, Christ, at the center of their lives.

Through her powerful intercession, may God bless our priests and give us many more of them in service to the good people of the Diocese of Birmingham.

Priests' Anniversaries, 2008

Name	Anniversary	Ordination Date
Rev. John Owen*	60 th	1948
Rev. Michael White*	60 th	1948
Rev. Andrew Kennedy	45 th	1963
Rev. Henry McDaid	45 th	1963
Rev. Patrick Cullen	40 th	1968
Rev. Frank Muscolino	40 th	1968
Rev. Joseph Culotta	25 th	1983
*Retired		
Rev. Patrick Sullivan (Deceased – 11/19/2007)	45 th	1963