

Homily for the Chrism Mass. 2019

Reverend Fathers, beloved Deacons, beloved religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are reminded in many ways that when Our Lord Jesus Christ founded His Church He did not make it a political party or social organisation. He did not constitute it to be a democracy. It was to be an extension of Himself; it was to be known as the Mystical Body of Christ and without any confusion or contradiction it was also to be known as the Bride of Christ. Expressions of one Mystery, formed with the purpose of winning us back to God that the Father may be glorified even in us.

Please forgive me if this homily seems to ignore you who are not ordained priests. Please believe that I have you very much in mind as I address some few (many) words to my priests. Listen because it is for your benefit that I speak to them words I hope will be received as encouragement.

Dear brother priests, last year and each year since 1982 I have listened to the Bishop as I sat there with you. Now I sit here, but even though I am doing the talking I am conscious that I am speaking to myself. In a strange way I try to say what I need to hear. Certainly there will be something incomplete about it, but there will be enough for this, my first year as Bishop. In the years to come I hope some of the gaps today will be filled.

Undoubtedly, there was a time in history when anointing in any form was not practiced; it was not known to people. In the course of time it came to be because it was experienced as beneficial. Later still, it found its place within religious rites as a symbol of being chosen, favoured and dedicated to a sacred purpose. In the hands of our Saviour been given a place within the Sacramental Rites. Before and after Baptism, in the conferring of Confirmation, in the care of the sick and dying, and a key part of the conferring of Holy Orders.

According to the Tradition we have received and the Teachings we follow it is understood as more than a sign or symbol. It endows the recipient with a gift from the Lord. He gives us something of Himself: His strength to resist evil, His joy, His healing, His comfort and reassurance to dispel fear, His Spirit that we might co-operate with Him and bear fruit that lasts, His sense of being chosen and in a sense set apart for a particular service for the Church. In all these cases anointing brings about a change in the one anointed. It has an effect as does the presence and touch of a friend when we face some difficult moment in life. It stays with us in more than memory.

Today we remember that we have been anointed in so many of those ways, but particularly that in having received the anointing for sacred ministry we become identified with Jesus the Priest. Many of us will be familiar with the expression 'alter Christus', the priest becomes another Christ. I must be careful not to reject sound teaching, but the point I wish to emphasise now is that there cannot be OTHER CHRISTS because Christ is one, there is only one Christ. His Priesthood is found in you.

A strong experience for me last year was fear, partly because of what a Bishop has to do. I admit that what caused me even more fear came from a sense of suddenly being brought so much closer to Christ. For years I had found a nice seat, a nice closeness that also had a nice distance. It worked. I was comfortable. It was as near as I wanted to be. Suddenly that was changed, and I had not expected it or asked for it or was comfortable with it. It is more than resembling Him, or being associated with Him. The words of St. John the Baptist fit well; 'He must grow greater: I must diminish'. What is happening to me? This is a question for someone called to be a Bishop but no less for someone called to be a priest. Since the Church does not operate a 'class' system it must also be true for all the Baptised.

The ordained priesthood is not simply a state, it has a purpose. We look at today's Gospel and our attention is drawn to Jesus – 'all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on Him'. The Priest is preparing Himself, setting Himself for the work He has been given, sent and tasked by the Father – anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit. Our eyes are on Him, but who are His eyes fixed on? The poor, waiting and longing for Good News; captives rotting as they wait for release; the blind longing for new sight; the downtrodden afraid to hope for someone to raise them up. This is the focus of the priest preparing Himself to offer His Mass for the Father's intention.

Many temptations and traps are set for us priests. I mention just two.

Firstly, we can fail to pray and reflect on Jesus calling us to resemble Him more and more closely. We can fail to let Him grow greater because we do not want to diminish. We fail to allow ourselves to be formed more and more in His likeness. We reach a point and say, that will do, this is me. I don't need to risk changing any more I don't need to come closer to Jesus. Or I am not capable of change. You might call it sclerosis of the soul. We don't want to be holy.

A second temptation is almost the opposite, continuing the alcohol theme! We become inebriated on the Grace of ordination to an extent where we are forgetful or neglectful of the poor, the captives, the blind, the downtrodden. Sacrilege is something we should always be on our guard to prevent, and yet when St. Peter tried to prevent Jesus falling into the hands of sinners 'Lord this must not happen to you!' he was rebuked.

Sacred duties of the priesthood are performed at the altar and the font and in the confessional, but the same priest after the example of Christ must recognise the sacred duties that must be performed in the home and the school and the offices and streets because that is where we will find the people on whom Christ has fixed his gaze, lost, damaged, desperate, confused, guilt-bound, abused, indifferent.

The anointing of the priest is not repeated, so sadly we easily lose a sense of its significance. But there is another part of the Rite of Ordination we do repeat annually that is worth reflecting on. I am talking about how we begin tomorrow's celebration of the Lord's Passion; we prostrate before the sanctuary. (some of you may grant yourselves a dispensation on the grounds that if you do manage to get down it's highly unlikely you'd ever get up again!) I recommend that we keep that act in mind today as we renew our promises.

In conclusion I will mention a few practical points for us to take away.

1. Be confident in your calling. Some of you may be the downtrodden. Your confidence comes from the Lord. He wants you to serve Him here and now.
2. Do not neglect your own Faith. St. Charles Borromeo reminds us of that in the beautiful reading chosen for his feast day.
3. Take seriously clergy days of recollection and on-going formation, please. Some of you seem to have made a decision to avoid them. You may deem them worthless. They are not.
4. I am concerned for my Presbyterate. We are all under pressure and that can tend to promote division and intolerance. Differences of all sorts exist. I am given the responsibility to hold us together. Please don't make my life harder than it already is. Respect and value one another.
5. Have a generous heart for the younger clergy, mindful of what they face.
6. Those heading towards 'retirement' please don't anticipate it! Your priestly ministry is until death. Your example and contribution to the life of the Diocese does not diminish.
7. Foster a love for the Diocese of Lancaster.
8. Encourage our seminarians and pray fervently, daily for vocations to the priesthood.
9. I express profound gratitude to those of you serving alongside us from other countries, far from your loved ones. I thank God for your parents and those who helped make you.
10. Particularly, let us keep in our prayers the Parisian Arch-Diocese affected by the tragedy of the fire in Notre Dame de Paris. Thank God there was no loss of life, but it has deeply affected the lives of so many, including Canon Cristofoli and the French Sisters serving here in the Diocese.