



Mass of Chrism: 6th April 2023, St Peter's Cathedral, Lancaster

I learnt that many of you were unable to hear my homily at the Mass of Chrism last year. This led me to consider repeating it this year: those of you who did hear it will be glad to know that I have decided not to.

In this Mass, during which I will ask my clergy to renew their priestly promises, there will be an emphasis on the vocation of the priest, as a Service to the Word, offered to the Father through the power and Grace of the Holy Spirit. Priests young and old, active and quiet (retired), will all be familiar with the context in which we find ourselves - the complex modern world. We must be more aware, keep more clearly in mind, the greater context which has remained unchanged for nearly 2000 years. That is, the call of Jesus Christ, the Holy Anointed One, to follow Him in His Mission – to do the will of the Father. That Mission reaches its climax in these next 3 days.

The renewal of your promises and the blessing of the Holy Oils are intimately linked. The obvious first image for us to note is that this evening, at the Mass of the Lord's Supper, Our Blessed Lord instituted the Sacred Priesthood. It is the anniversary therefore of our ordination as His priests. The striking posture we adopted on the day of our ordination - our prostration - will be repeated tomorrow afternoon at the beginning of the celebration of the Lord's Passion.

As the Eternal Word made flesh, we are aware that in Christ's veins flowed the blood of Mary. And yet, in all He did, His actions, words, encounters, flowed the Divine Grace of the Spirit. As mortals, priests like everyone else are conscious of how easy it is to 'drift', to drift away from the path set by Jesus. We are tempted to take the easier way, tempted to complacency and carelessness. We can be overcome by weariness or become disillusioned by self-doubt. Our zeal can fall victim to so many subtle attacks – and that is all the enemy needs. That is his chance to gain access for his own mission to thwart God's purpose. But Jesus is aware of this and has given us effective safeguards and remedies.

Of course, this is not something solely relevant to the priest's vocation. It can and does affect individuals in all walks of life: husbands and wives can drift apart; dedicated professionals can, over the years, 'run out of steam'; best friends can find themselves strangers to one another. But it is of particular concern for us clergy, given the responsibilities and duties we carry. **Beware of drift.** A relationship a Bishop has with his priests is also at risk. It is not enough to think of what was: what we have been given must be nurtured and cultivated. It must remain valued.

The Sacred Oils will be given to you for your work of winning and saving souls; of strengthening the members of your flock so that they can face the rigours of our secular life and become evidence of the Lord's unfailing compassion for fallen man. As Jesus came to be known as the Lord's Anointed One, so will they become known as Christians, the Lord's anointed.

You are aware that I recently took some time away from the Diocese. It was a rich and intense time, giving me much to reflect on personally, and for us here in Lancaster. In time I will look for ways to share its fruit with you. Now, I have two images I wish to use today.

The first is shared as a straightforward warning. I came across Government figures who had taken on positions of leadership and service for their people but were living very much as people expecting to be served. Perhaps originally, they had the correct intentions, but something had become corrupted within them as individuals. What was obvious was the desperately sad consequences this corruption had on the population. It became something that threatened not just the livelihood of the people, but life itself. As this happens in the secular domain, so it can, and does, in the sacred. I present this first as a warning to myself. I'm not getting at you! Merely reminding us of Christ who said that He is here among us as one who serves.

If and when we become aware of this corruption of our vocation, we are also made aware of safeguards and remedies provided by our Lord. Faithfulness to prayer, Faithfulness to Confession (it's not only parishioners who are less frequent) and humility.



The second image I wish to share will bring the use of Sacred Oils more to mind. Now I must tell you of something that is not pleasant, and that evokes a silent cry of pity.

I spent 4 days as the guest of the Bishop of Rumbek, Christian Carlassare, an Italian Comboni missionary who was the target of an assassination attempt days before his Episcopal ordination in 2021. Thank God he survived. The investigations that followed disclosed that his would-be assassins were following the instructions of the priest who had been acting as the Apostolic Administrator who obviously thought he should have been appointed. Thank heaven he wasn't. That is a story for another time. Bishop Christian took me to visit an orphanage in his Diocese, run by the Missionary Sisters of Charity (Mother Saint Teresa).

Amongst the infants was Wenceslaus, still a babe in arms. He was baptised Wenceslaus because it was on that Saint's Feast Day that he was found abandoned. That is bad enough, but what makes it more awful was that poor Wenceslaus had been abandoned in a pit latrine – a toilet. A pile and pool of human waste. He had lain there for some time. The dark, the stench, the filth, the flies. I have known such places to be the homes of bats, rats and snakes.

Wenceslaus was strong enough – desperate enough to cry. The cry was heard. People went into the mess, lifted him out and brought him to the convent where the Sisters worked a miracle. They bathed him, cleaned him, removed the maggots from his eyes, nourished him and began to give him the love he needed in order to recover his health. But he remains deeply traumatised. Perhaps too young to know or understand or remember what had happened to him, he was undoubtedly still affected by his experience. The Sisters enveloped him with love. Soothing him, anointing him with sweet smelling baby lotion to overcome the infections and restore the health of his skin and body.

The anointing that you will perform with these Sacred oils is in a true sense intended to remedy the deep-rooted effects of sin. You will assist and enable the faithful to overcome the trauma that sin has caused – not least Original Sin. Be conscious of this as you lovingly apply them when you perform the Sacraments. Know the good that the Spirit does through your ministry. That's why your ministry matters. That's why it is relevant; why your promises are to be kept. It reminds us of where we have all come from; what we have been taken out of, what we all lay in. Our cry was heard, and we have been found, and we are loved and anointed with sweet smelling ointments, so that the stench of sin will not cling to us.

Lent began with us being anointed with Ash. Today Lent concludes with us being given the Sacred Oils. Fathers, I thank you for your ministry; for your example; dedication and for your companionship. I pray that you will be renewed today, and understand more deeply the beauty of your vocation – to enable the Lord's tender love to hear, find, rescue, cleanse, anoint and build up the bodies and souls of your flock.

+ Paul

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