



Chrism Mass Homily: Priesthood requires courage, willingness to love

March 26, 2002

Because of its location in Holy Week, the Chrism Mass, by tradition, has a special meaning for priests. Every priest acts *in persona Christi*, or in the person of Christ, at every Eucharist and in celebrating all the other sacraments. So during every Holy Week, at the Chrism Mass, we have two important moments.

First, we bless the chrism and the holy oils we use throughout the coming year at all the Baptisms, Confirmations, Anointings of the Sick and Ordinations in our local Church. We do this to remind ourselves that all the sacraments and sacramentals draw their power from the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. The sacramental oils are physical signs that point us toward a bigger, supernatural reality ?? the sacramental unity of the Church. That unity is sealed by the anointing of all believers at Baptism and Confirmation, and the anointing of priests and bishops in a special way at Ordination.

The holy oils we bless at this Mass seal us to one another in the Church. They also consecrate us to Jesus Christ. The word "Christ" means the Anointed One. Jesus came from the line of David, who had been anointed with oil as God's chosen king by the Prophet Samuel. When we call Jesus the Christ, we acknowledge that He is the messiah, the Chosen One, sealed and consecrated to His Father. And whether we share in Christ's priesthood through the priesthood of the baptized, or the ministerial priesthood of the ordained, we're marked with a similar sign of consecration at our Baptism and Confirmation.

The second important moment in the Chrism Mass takes place when we who are priests renew our commitment to priestly service. Some years, that commitment is easier than others. This Lent especially has been a "way of the cross" for every priest.

Above anything else, priesthood requires a willingness to love. And I don't mean "love," the theory, or "love," the warm feeling. I mean "love," the act of will, the act of courage. Real love is always expensive. Real love is always anchored in the truth about ourselves and about others. And while the truth will make us free, nobody said it would make us comfortable. The *truth* is that the world is a sinful place, and we're part of that sinfulness. This is why God sets His Chosen People *apart* in Baptism. This is why He sets His priests *apart* in the Sacrament of Orders. In a way all Christians — but especially priests — are caught between the stars we reach for and the clay we're made of. God asks us to acknowledge all of our many sins — but then He asks us to trust in His love anyway, to follow Him anyway, to sanctify the world anyway. And that means that if we try to do what seems so improbable — to love as Jesus loved — we're going to suffer when we fail.

The devil loves it when a Christian fails. But what he loves even more is when a Christian *quits trying*. If the apostles ran away after Gethsemane, it's not really much of a surprise when we hear about people who are afraid to admit they're Catholics, or priests who feel embarrassed to wear their Roman collars in public. Opening ourselves to the contempt of the world *hurts*, and every layperson and every priest here today has felt some of that hurt over the last eight weeks.

When Isaiah tells us in our First Reading that God sent him to "bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound," he doesn't talk about the cost, because he's consumed with the reward of serving God — and rightly so. But Isaiah was a sinner like the rest of us, and from the Scriptures we know that people reviled him the same way they reviled all the rest of the prophets.

The cost of discipleship is high. The cost of loving well is *very* high, and it's called humility. Real love is always humbling. It forces us to be obedient to the needs of others and to choose what's best for others first. It forces us to admit our sins and repent of them, but it also demands that we not be deterred by them. This is why discipleship is not for the fainthearted, and the priesthood has no room for cowards. God needs men of character. God needs men who will allow Him to make them into something holy, something more than what they are without Him.

Our Second Reading today reminds us that Jesus is God's "faithful witness" — and just as each of us is conformed to Christ through Baptism or through Ordination, so too God asks *every one* of us to share in His Son's faithful witness, pure in our hearts and in our actions, and committed to serving the truth. Each of us is set apart for service to the people of God. So at the beginning and end of every day, we need to ask ourselves: Are we really giving everything we have to the Lord; are we really anointing our lives to the vocation of following in Christ's footsteps?

The Gospel tells us that when Jesus finished His reading from Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue — "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" — He sat down and said, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In Jesus, the word of God became flesh. He embodied the Scriptures in His life. When people saw and heard *Him*, they saw and heard the God who loved them.

Today, Jesus asks each of us as to be His Father's word *becoming* flesh through the witness of our lives. It's through our witness, despite all our failures, that Christ sanctifies the world. When people see and hear us, they should see and hear Jesus Christ — and through Jesus, encounter the Father who loves them *despite* their sins, and our sins.

This is the responsibility we all share. It's also our privilege. May God grant us the courage, the perseverance and the joy to be worthy of it.