

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me.”**

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Chrism Mass  
Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me.” My brothers and sisters, welcome to this Chrism Mass, to this joyful celebration in the midst of the solemnity of Holy Week.

The distinctive ritual of this Chrism Mass is the blessing of the holy oils that are to be used in the sacramental life of our Church, in each of our parishes. The holy oils that we will bless are a sign of our Christian identity, a sign that we share in the anointing of Jesus Christ. Every one of us. What Jesus says in the Gospel today is true for every Christian: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me.” And the most important of these oils is the Sacred Chrism. Of course, the word chrism has the same root meaning as the word “Christ,” the “anointed one.” With Chrism we are anointed, in Baptism, in Confirmation, and in Holy Orders. But what does this anointing mean? What is it for?

As the name implies, this anointing joins us in a special way to Christ himself, the “anointed one” of God. When we are anointed, we are united to him, conformed to him, and embraced by him. We share in his life, in his mission, and in his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We are made participants in the life and love of the Trinity.

That anointing first happens in the rite of Baptism. After we are baptized in water, we are anointed with Chrism, and we are told: “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.” Then we are anointed again with Chrism in Confirmation: “Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.” My brothers and sisters, these anointings in Baptism and Confirmation make us one with Christ, the anointed one, but they also bestow on us a mission. We are anointed to be witnesses of Jesus in the world, living examples of Gospel faith. We are anointed to be a leaven in the world, those whose manifest love for Jesus will warm the hearts of others, and bring them to Jesus too. We are anointed for truth, to speak gently but boldly of the truth God has revealed, and to share that truth with our neighbor, our co-worker, with the culture in which we live, which has grown allergic to the truth. We are anointed for charity and mercy, to make known to everyone the mercy of God, the love he has for his children, and his desire to welcome all into his Kingdom.

To use a phrase of Pope Francis, my friends, we are all anointed to be missionary disciples, those whom our Lord calls to himself, those whom he sends out as his ambassadors. Young or old, healthy or infirm, rich or poor, married or single, each one of us is anointed for mission, a mission to sanctify the world, to win the world for Jesus Christ, one soul at a time.

But there is another anointing with Chrism, and that is the anointing received by our priests. My brothers, this day belongs to all of us, but in a special way it belongs to you, and I am always so happy to see you all gathered together with the faithful of our diocese for this Chrism Mass. On the day of your priestly ordination, a year ago or fifty years ago, you stretched out your hands, and you were anointed with the Sacred Chrism with these words: “The Lord Jesus Christ, whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, guard and preserve you that you may sanctify the Christian people and offer sacrifice to God.” Through this anointing, we pray that our Lord Jesus Christ will guard and preserve us, and that’s reassuring in challenging times. We need his guarding and preserving, we need his grace. We cannot be his priests any other way.

But there is more. We are anointed for a reason, for a purpose: that we may “sanctify the Christian people and offer sacrifice to God.” My brothers, we first sanctify God’s people by our teaching, by our sharing with them the Gospel, the teachings that Jesus has entrusted to his Church. By teaching the sound doctrine of our faith, we bring people to a true encounter with Jesus Christ. We open minds and hearts to the work of God’s grace, we build them up in the truth, and we enable them to live the faith as

Christ's disciples in the world. The Second Vatican Council calls this the first duty of the priest, to preach the Gospel, to teach the faith. Our world has grown averse to the claims of truth, but our zeal for teaching that truth must not be lessened. In fact, we must be more persistent than ever in proclaiming Christ as our savior.

We are also anointed to be shepherds, to look after the flock, the family that our Lord has entrusted to us. Many have grown weary or indifferent, and many have simply wandered away. But we can't be content with their absence. As shepherds, as those anointed for service to God's people, we must be ready to go in search of those who are lost, or weak, or confused, or indifferent. We all know that we can't force anyone to believe or to come to church, but we can invite and persuade with love, with compassion, with zeal, with answers to their questions. I remember well the priests in my life who were shepherds to me, and I'm sure you remember the shepherds in your life too. We are anointed for mission, to shepherd the flock and welcome others into the fold. We are to be shepherds after the heart of Christ.

And, of course, we sanctify God's people through the sacraments, through those saving signs that unite us to Christ's Paschal Mystery. Especially in the sacrifice of the Eucharist do we forge a mystical bond between Christ and his people, and we are made one with him ourselves. The hands that were anointed at ordination raise up the Body and Blood of Christ for the people of God. They baptize, they absolve sins, they anoint the sick with Christ's healing. I'm sure you've all seen the poem, "The Beautiful Hands of the Priest," and perhaps it is a bit sentimental, but my brothers our hands were anointed for a beautiful mission, the priestly mission of Jesus himself, who came to bind up wounds and to seek out those who are lost. He came to make his people holy, and now he asks us to carry on that saving work in his name and by his grace.

Dear brothers and sisters, we are all anointed for a mission, the mission of Jesus himself. He came as our Redeemer in the power of the Spirit to reconcile the world to the Father, and now he commissions each one of us, ordained, consecrated, and lay faithful, to be a part of that mission. We are anointed with the oil of gladness because our mission is a joyful one. There is no greater message, no greater hope, no greater promise than the one we have to offer. It is Jesus himself. So let us renew the joy of our Christian vocation, and dedicate ourselves once again to sharing the joy and love of Christ, God's anointed one, with all people.