

Be 'servants of servants of God', share the anointing with others

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

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*Chrism Mass
Cathedral of St. Mary
Fargo, ND*

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. . . . You yourselves shall be named priests of the Lord, ministers of our God you shall be called.” This morning I have the joy of celebrating my first Chrism Mass with you as Bishop of Fargo. I am so very happy to be with all of you, and especially with the priests of our diocese, for whom this is an occasion of particular significance. This Chrism Mass is for many of us a high point of the liturgical year. Nearly all the priests of the diocese attend, and many of you in the Cathedral today come to this Mass every year. But why is that? What draws us to this celebration, and what makes it such an occasion of solemnity and joy?

Of course, it is the occasion when the bishop of the diocese will bless the sacred oils to be used in the sacramental life of the Church. From here will be distributed the oils that will bless the faithful throughout the diocese, here in Fargo, and in Grand Forks, and in Jamestown, and in Bottineau, and in Grafton, indeed in all the parishes of the diocese. The oil of catechumens helps those who are to be baptized to persevere on their journey of conversion. The oil of the sick strengthens and heals the body and spirit of those who are afflicted with illness or the weakness of old age. And the sacred chrism, which is not only blessed but consecrated, indicates in a special way the outpouring of God’s spirit on his people, the anointing that makes us share in the royal and priestly dignity of Jesus himself.

We are anointed with Chrism in the celebration of baptism, and we are anointed again when we are confirmed. And some of us here have been anointed with Chrism in our ordination as priests. So for all of us, whatever our vocation in the Church may be, God has marked us as his own, he has anointed us and therefore consecrated us as his dwelling place, as his temple. We are earthen vessels in which the God of glory has made his dwelling, and we are anointed to be his instruments, his ministers of love and mercy in the world.

So, in a certain way, this Mass is a celebration of the sacramental life of the entire Church. It is a solemn celebration of the anointing of Jesus given to all of us, an anointing that makes us one with God, that allows all of us to share in the priesthood of Christ.

But for the priests gathered here, it is also an occasion of special significance. The Chrism Mass is for all priests a sort of anniversary, a commemoration of that moment when Jesus instituted the priesthood, when he conferred his priesthood on his apostles. On this occasion, we priests are invited to renew our priestly promises, to recommit ourselves to the promises we made on the day of our ordinations, whether that was a year ago, or five years ago, or twenty-five, or fifty, or

sixty, or more. How marvelous it is to know that one of our jubilarians is celebrating sixty years as a priest, and there are others among us who have been priests even longer.

For us priests, this is a blessed opportunity to return to that sacred moment when the bishop laid his hands upon us, prayed over us, and anointed us with the sacred chrism. It is an occasion to remember the many people whom we have served as priests, the many we have baptized, and the many confessions we have heard, the hundreds and even thousands of times we have celebrated the Eucharist, the many marriages we have witnessed, and the homilies we have preached. I can only really speak for myself, but I don't doubt for a moment that all of us priests give thanks to God for the sublime privilege of sharing in the anointing and the priesthood of Jesus.

Many of you probably know that I served as rector of a college seminary for a number of years, and they were great years. I was very blessed during those years to work with young men who were preparing for the priesthood, and this work made me appreciate and love the priesthood even more. And those seminarians often heard me speak of the life and work of the seminary's patron, St. Gregory the Great, who called himself the "servant of the servants of God." This is a title still used by the popes, but I don't think I'm breaking any rules in saying that it applies to us priests as well. Isn't that what we are, isn't that what we are called to be? Are we not servants, whose calling and mission is to serve all of God's servants? Pope Benedict told the priests of Rome just two years ago that "a priest never belongs only to himself." We are anointed and blessed to be priests for others.

Last year, at his first Chrism Mass as Pope, Pope Francis said to the assembled priests: "This I ask you, be shepherds with the odor of the sheep; make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men..." With this marvelous image, Pope Francis urges all of us to go out to the flock, out to those whom our Lord seeks, and to abide with them, to share with them the anointing that Christ has bestowed on us. In a few short days, Blessed John Paul II will be declared a saint, and he too urged us to set out into the far regions, seeking those whom God seeks. He used the phrase that Jesus himself used: "Put out into the deep." In other words, be willing to go where others would not go, to be a fisher of men, and to seek a catch for the Lord in unlikely places. In a few moments, we will be asked by the bishop to renew our priestly promises, to be more closely conformed to Jesus and to be moved once again by zeal for souls. And in renewing these promises, we are anointed once again by that same spirit of the Lord who sent Jesus forth as our high priest and redeemer.

Dear friends, please pray for your priests. I know I speak for all of them gathered together when I tell you how beautiful it is to see so many here, so many who love the Lord, who love the Church, who love their priests. I know you are here because of the work of men like Msgr. Senger, and Fr. Kinzler, and Fr. Miller, and many others too numerous to mention. We depend on your prayers and your assistance, we are blessed to be priests of Jesus Christ for you. And we belong to you. As priests, we belong to Christ, and therefore we belong to you, to the Church. You know our frailties and our limitations. We are ordinary men who have been given the privilege to carry out extraordinary works in the name of Jesus. And so, we need your prayers, the prayers of the entire Church, if we are to persevere in living out this anointing of our priestly lives. May God, who has anointed us and who has begun this good work in all of us, bring it to completion. Amen.