

Homily by Most Rev Dr Philip Boyce, OCD
Bishop of Raphoe
Holy Thursday. Chrism Mass. 2017

Dear Brother Priests:

Today is a special day for us priests. We recall and relive that solemn hour when we were ordained. In spirit we return to that Upper Room in Jerusalem, the Cenacle. We listen again to the words Christ spoke to his Apostles and which are preserved for us in the 13th to the 17th Chapters of St. John's Gospel.

They are the deepest secrets and desires of his Sacred Heart. He is speaking to his friends, his chosen Apostles, his trusted ones. On these he relied to continue his work of salvation, to build up the Church, his Mystical Body, and to preach the Gospel to all nations.

Holy Thursday is the birthday of the priesthood: "This is my Body, this is my Blood, Do this in memory of me". On that night, the day before He died, Christ gave to his Apostles and to all of us, very precious and life-changing gifts: the new Commandment of love; the gift of unity; the promise of the Holy Spirit; the assurance that present sorrow would be turned into joy - his joy; the gift of the holy Eucharist and the command to the Apostles: "Do this in memory of me".

Maundy Thursday and the solemn Chrism Mass help us to come to a deeper understanding and awareness of what we really are - anointed servants, chosen by the Lord, endowed with the spiritual power to celebrate the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ and to forgive sins in his name. Daily routine can easily blunt our sense of the sacredness and spiritual power of the actions we perform as priests. Repetition of sacred signs and ceremonies, as well as familiarity with what we do on a daily basis, tends to dull our perception of all that is great and mysterious and sanctifying in our priestly activities. The daily routine can deaden our sense of amazement at what the Lord has placed in our hands. Therefore, it is helpful to have our days of recollection and renewal, or a day like Holy Thursday every year that brings us back to meditate on how it all started and on what is expected from us, and on what the Lord counts on from each one of us. All this can reignite our first love for Christ and our fervour in his service.

On the blessed day of Ordination, our hands were anointed with holy chrism. They were given the priestly power to bless, to touch the sacred species, to sanctify, to anoint others. The

ordaining Bishop, as he signed our hands with the oil of Chrism, said: "The Father anointed our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God". The anointing then was meant not simply to make holy our hands, but through our ministry to flow down upon the lives of those entrusted to our care.

Our present Holy Father, Pope Francis, continually challenges us not to store up in our own selves the gifts we have received, but to use them in the service of the marginalized, the poor, the little ones who are so easily overlooked and neglected. Referring to the anointing of kings, prophets and priests in Old Testament times, and in particular to Aaron, the Pope states: "The Lord will say this clearly: his anointing is meant for the poor, for prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone. My dear Brothers, the ointment is not intended to make us fragrant, much less to be kept in a jar."

"A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news. Our people like to hear the Gospel preached with "unction", they like it when the Gospel touches their daily lives, when it runs down like the oil of Aaron to the edges of reality, when it brings light to moments of extreme darkness, to the "outskirts" where people of faith are most exposed to the onslaught of those who want to tear down their faith" (At the Chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, 28 March, 2013). When we priests are true friends of Christ and when we love and sacrifice ourselves for our people, then grace passes through our anointed hands, through our words and gestures, and we are shepherds and mediators. The Pope constantly urges us to stir up God's grace and perceive in every request from any member of our flock, "even those that are inconvenient and at times purely material, the desire of our people to be anointed with fragrant oil, since they know that we have it."

"The priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little... misses out on the best of our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart".

And in words to us that have become famous, Pope Francis continues: "This I ask you: be shepherds, with the "odour of the sheep", make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fisher of men". (Ibid.)

I am not suggesting, dear brothers, that you do not shepherd your people. I often admire your commitment, your care of the sick and infirm, your journeys to the hospital to see and comfort a sick parishioner, your visits to your local school to instruct the children and to encourage the teachers, and so on.

Like the prophets or like Christ himself, as we heard in the Readings: "The Lord has anointed you. He has sent you to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken." At times you may ask: who are the poor for whom we are asked to have particular regard? Here in our diocese you do not normally meet people who are homeless and starving, lying by the roadside. But there are people in every parish whose hearts are broken, who are materially or spiritually poor in some way. Your ministry is mostly with those people: children who await a word of instruction and direction in the local school; people who are ill at home or in the hospital,

and who get so much consolation and encouragement from a First Friday call or from other visits; those who come to you in the Confessional and who long to be relieved of their burden of guilt and sin, and restored to God's friendship; the dying who long earnestly for the mercy of God; the bereaved who have just lost a loved and dear one of the family; the doubtful who need a word of reassurance, etc.

Yes, your ministry makes you angels of peace, mercy and hope for many souls. As priests you remain upright and vigilant, shielding your people against spiritual foes, making sure that the word of truth, the teaching of Christ and the guidance of the Church are not forgotten or lost. In many ways, 'you keep the world awake for God'. Between God and his people you are called to be a bridge that connects, not a wall that separates.

I conclude with words once used by Pope Saint Paul VI: "The priest is a man who does not live for himself, but for others. He is a man of the community... the world needs him. The Church needs him. ...What category of persons has no need of the Christian message? Of faith and grace? Of someone who devotes himself unselfishly and lovingly to others? Are there any limits to pastoral charity? And is not the need of such charity even greater where there is least desire for it" (Conclusion of a Year of Faith in 1968).

You are all ministers of the Eucharist and also of the poor who are hungering for God and thirsting for the truth. When recording for us the final meeting of Christ with his Apostles at the Last Supper, St. John does not mention the words of the Institution of the Blessed Eucharist, but he does give us an account of Christ washing the feet of his Apostles. It is as if to say, the grace of Holy Communion should lead us to be of service to others. Remember the words of Mother Teresa that were quoted to us at a recent day of recollection: "There is only one Jesus. If we do not touch Him in the Eucharist, we do not touch Him in the poor. If we do not touch Him in the poor, we do not touch him in the Eucharist". (In Chicago. After her talk, in answer to a question).

You, as priests, are continually meeting and touching him in the Eucharist and in those who in one way or another are poor or in need of help. I thank you for your generosity and goodness. Do continue to be the voice and presence of Christ for your parishioners and for those who need your help. Never doubt the value of your priestly presence and ministry. The world needs you. The Lord himself needs you. As Mother Julia, the Foundress of the Spiritual Family The Work, who had a great love for priests, once said about them: "Their life is an offering. Their word enkindles the light of faith. Their prayer has power over our enemy, the evil one. From their blessing there flows down the grace of forgiveness for repentant sinners."

Be confident then and believe in what you have received. And may Mary, Mother of priests protect you.

I thank all of you, dear people, for coming to the Cathedral this morning for the Chrism Mass, in order to be with and to accompany the priests of the Diocese. I thank you for the co-operation and support you give to your priests. Do continue to pray for them and for the gift of good vocations to meet all the spiritual needs of our parishes. May these coming days of Holy Week be ones of grace and holiness for all of you.