

CHRISM MASS
Westminster Cathedral

TUESDAY 3 APRIL 2012

Homily

Our Mass today, this special annual moment, celebrates the life and mission we have been given in the Lord. Today we seek a profound renewal of all that makes us instruments of the Lord in our society today. So we approach this celebration with great humility. Here we are to receive the gifts we need if we are to fulfil the great invitation we have been given.

In the Opening Prayer of the Mass, we asked that by sharing in the consecration of Christ - a consecration in the Holy Spirit - we may become witnesses to his resurrection, to his new life, in our society today. This is our calling

Chrism is the outward sign of that consecration. Chrism, the word which shapes the very title 'Christ', and indeed the word 'Christian', is at the heart of this ceremony, for in blessing and using chrism we are bound to Christ both in his life and in his mission. Through Chrism we are a consecrated people, set apart for a task: that of consecrating the world to God, through our prayer and through our witness.

Chrism, as you know, is used at our baptism and confirmation. At baptism, Chrism proclaims that by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit we have become, in the Son, the Father's beloved sons and daughters. We are called to embody in our daily actions, in our flesh, the fullness of life as our creator means it to be. At Confirmation, this baptismal grace is deepened by a further anointing with Chrism. Enriched with the special strength of the Holy Spirit we are more firmly united to Christ and called to be his true witnesses, spreading and defending our faith by word and deed. Today we hear and respond afresh to this vocation.

Chrism is also used at the ordination of priests and bishops. As the words of the Preface state, through the laying on of hands the Lord chooses men to become sharers in his sacred ministry, acting in the person of Christ the Head and in the name of the Church. The Preface continues: These men, our priests, give up their lives for the Lord and for the salvation of their brothers and sisters. They strive to be conformed to the image of Christ himself, offering to God a particular and constant witness of faith and love. This is our solemn prayer for our priests - and bishops - today.

Today I want to thank my brother priests, as I am sure we all do, for all their faithfulness and ministry. Let no one doubt, ours are good priests, sincere and generous.

We priests are thoroughly human, thoroughly flawed. Yet we are glad to be priests, glad to serve the Church we love, willingly seeking renewal today. And we are greatly encouraged by two things in particular. First by the enduring generosity of our older brethren, who always want to continue their ministry even after they have stepped

down from the full demands of parish responsibilities. And secondly, by the enthusiasm of those who are stepping forward to test their vocation in seminary formation: ten new men last year and nine this year, to start in September.

This day you witness we priests renewing the promises of our ordination. This day you also see us wearing striking new vestments. I thank everyone who has played a part in the design and provision of them.

The renewal of our promises and the new vestments go well together.

There are three key elements they have in common.

First, the promises we renew today are a pledge to work together as a presbyterate maintaining a strong and visible unity with the bishop.

This is signified in the common vestment we wear. It is the mark of our brotherly unity and of our desire to recognise in practice the unity in Christ which is a hallmark of our lives.

The design of the vestment points to this Cathedral, for this Cathedral Church is the focus of that unity and the seat of the bishop. Here we express and renew our unity.

Then the promises we make focus on two key elements in our ministry. We promise 'to discharge faithfully the sacred office of teaching, not seeking any gain but moved only by zeal for souls' and 'to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God in the Holy Eucharist and other liturgical rites.' Indeed, these are two of the great callings of the priest by which the Church is both formed and nourished: to preach the Word and to celebrate the Mass, thereby making present for all people the saving sacrifice of Christ.

Both of these tasks are signified in the designs of the vestment which have been taken from the embellishments of this Cathedral.

The first is the five circles, an ancient geometric pattern, which represents Christ in majesty, surrounded by the four Gospels, or reaching out to the four ends of the earth. You can see this pattern there on the pulpit of the Cathedral, with the central circle containing the figure of the Lamb of God holding His flag of victory. It is also present on the bishop's cathedra, the chair which signifies the bishop as teacher of the faith.

The same pattern is repeated with the diamonds. These represent the five wounds of Christ, the wounds through which we are saved, the wounds open for us in the celebration of every Mass.

This vestment, then, is a symbol of all that our priesthood means: the joy of a unity between brothers; the privilege of teaching Christ and his saving Word, received and absorbed through the Words of the Gospels; the awesome character of ordained priesthood by which the Body of Christ is broken here and now, His Blood here and now poured out, so that the divine life may be strengthened within us.

My prayer is that every time we don these vestments we will recall the meaning of its design and be refreshed by the grace received in prayer. Indeed, when vesting we do well to recall the traditional prayer that accompanied the accepting of the chasuble. It reads: 'O Lord you said, "My yoke is sweet and my burden light," grant that I may so carry it to merit Your grace. Amen.'

If that is a prayer for us priests, then there is one also for you the faithful people of Christ. It is a prayer I will address to you in just a few moments, but it is good to hear it twice. It is a request reminding us again of the vital role of the priest in the life of the Church, a role which we cherish again today as we thank and support our priests.

Here it is, a request which I put to you with all my heart:

'Pray for your priests that the Lord may pour out his gifts abundantly upon them and keep them faithful as ministers of Christ, the High Priest, so that they may lead you to Him who is the source of salvation.'

Today the oil of Catechumens, the oil of the Sick and the newly consecrated Chrism will be taken from here to every parish in the Diocese. May they effect a deep renewal in the lives of all who are anointed with these oils, in the lives of all who accompany them with their love and prayers and in the lives of all who administer those sacraments. Then we will be deeply rooted in Christ and ready to face all the challenges of our age with serenity, determination and vigour.

Amen.

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster