

Chrism Mass 2012

This is the twelfth year I have stood before you at the Chrism Mass to share with you my thoughts and reflections, and in so doing encourage you in your priesthood. It would be reasonable to assume that you have heard it all before or that there is nothing much left for me to say. It is not an uncommon attitude and I know that feeling because that was how I was beginning to feel a few months ago so I asked the Holy Father if I could take a few weeks off to make a retreat far from the diocese. He agreed to my request and I set off for Southern California to deepen my friendship with God and his Son, Jesus.

Without going into too much detail I can tell you that I found the six weeks that I was away an enriching time in my spiritual life. You will be pleased to learn that God and I are back on speaking terms! That is the modest claim I make at the end of the retreat experience. Most relationships are established and developed through conversations and that also applies to our relationship with God.

There is a story, which may or may not be true, of the young student who said to Professor Ratzinger that he had lost his faith and did not believe in the existence of God anymore. Could the learned professor help the student regain his faith through argument, reason and academic rigor? He was told to go away and sit in silence for half an hour every day for a month, and if at the end of that time he still did not believe in God then to come back and they would try a different approach. The student did not return.

During my retreat I found much to my surprise that I could sit in silence for three or four hours a day to meditate on the tasks my retreat director gave me; some were from the Ignatian spiritual exercises, others from scripture and some from the poetic and artistic traditions within the church. This is not a very Dominican approach but I yielded to it and consoled myself that St Dominic was one of the heroes who inspired Ignatius, when he was recovering from his battle wounds. Seeing oneself in the mind's eye alongside the Son of God undoubtedly deepened my friendship with him but it also gave

me an insight that I hadn't fully grasped before; and that is that holiness in both ordinary and special. It is ordinary, as in the everyday things of life as well as in the great acts of love as exemplified by the saints. It is special in so far as we place ourselves at Jesus' side through our prayer, especially praying the scriptures but most importantly of all through the sacraments that he left us so that we should not be alone or struggle for reassurance.

As ministers of those sacraments you/we have a great responsibility to make ensure that all God's people are able to receive them often and worthily. We must give freely the gift we have received. But even though the matter of the sacraments is often very ordinary stuff we should never lose sight of its intrinsic holiness or how it can bring about very great holiness in those who receive the sacraments. You can't have one with out the other. Our assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of holiness, in our lives and the lives of our people is in the signs of an ordinary nature that with the words and intention of the Church bring about grace or holiness.

One such ordinary stuff is the mixture of olive oil and balsam we use for the chrism that gives its name to today's celebration of Holy Mass. Chrism is *holy* chrism. It is essential in the sacrament of confirmation, and a powerful symbol in the sacraments of Baptism and order.

Chrism and Holiness

St Cyril of Jerusalem reminds us that chrism is no ordinary oil or ointment: "But be sure not to regard the Chrism merely as ointment. Just as the bread of the Eucharist after the invocation of the Holy Spirit is no longer just bread, but the body of Christ, so the holy chrism after the invocation is no longer ordinary ointment but Christ's grace, which through the presence of the Holy spirit instils his divinity into us. It is applied to the forehead and the organs of sense with a symbolic meaning; the body is anointed with the visible ointment, and the souls sanctified by the holy, hidden Spirit."

In the prayer of consecration of the Chrism I pray; Fill it with the power of your Holy Spirit through Christ your Son.

And at your ordination to the priesthood the bishop prayed over you: Renew within him the Spirit of Holiness.

In the prayer of consecration whether it is of the Chrism, or your prayer in the act of Consecration in the mass the continuous link is the gift of the spirit who is called holy. This Holy spirit is what sanctifies you and enables you thought the sacraments to sanctify god's people.

The gift of the Holy Spirit

A good way to understand the gift of the Holy Spirit is to see it as a gift both to the world and to the church. I think that is what it means in the Creed when say that the Holy Spirit proceeds both from the father and the son. The presence of the Spirit in the world is like this, and I quote from St. John's Gospel, "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes, so it is with every one born of the Spirit". That is Jesus' own description of the Spirit to Nicodemus. The world is undoubtedly sanctified in this implicit way. But more explicitly Jesus has given us, the Church, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he describes as another advocate, someone to take his' place and to speak up for us, or as a comforter like a brother or sister. Being Holy, then should be second nature to us. Priests filled with the Holy Spirit enabling others to become sanctified. But this does not happen simply in the rarefied atmosphere of the Church or in our private and personal prayer life. Holiness is in the world too; and in seeking justice and equality, in working for peace and not for division we discover the holiness and sanctity that is in nature and in every person. Sharing unblest bread as we feed the hungry safeguards us from isolating the consecrated bread of the Eucharist from the world that Jesus gave his body to save.

The Flame Youth Congress that took place at the Wembley Arena recently. Many young people from our diocese attended as well some who were only young at heart. What was clear from their exuberant participation as they explored themes of respect, friendship and excellence was how deep within them the was also a silent place, and surprisingly all the energy and noise

reached its climax, not with fireworks and even louder music but with benediction and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. It is your work and mine, as priests and bishop to serve these young people with the word of Truth and the word made flesh in the Eucharist so that they can become holy, not in a random way which may make them feel good for a few moments, but in a focused direction that will give them real food for their journey through life. To be part of this work of sanctification we too must be holy.

The Holy Father has called for a Year of Faith, which will begin later this year to remember and celebrate the opening of the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago. Of course we will use this year to study more about what our faith means to us. We can look once more to the teachings of the Council and that will help us understand our relationship with God more deeply but I believe for most people it will be heard as a challenge to become more holy. There are always two meanings to the faith in a religious sense. One being the list of beliefs and doctrines we assent to and uphold but the other is more interesting to me, and that is way faith lives in people's hearts. How faith animates them and makes them devout and lovely people - people who like Jesus see that their anointing with holy chrism at their baptism and especially at their confirmation has made them Holy. They walk with Jesus, and are close to Jesus in prayer and in doing what Jesus did. These are the people who go to poor, and work for the disadvantaged, who uphold the values of family life even though it is a struggle at times. These are people who make daily sacrifices for others; mothers for their children, teachers for their pupils, people in commerce and industry upholding moral values that are fast disappearing from our society - these are holy people, people of faith.

Living stones

Holy people, people of faith are the living stones of the church of Nottingham Diocese. The good people you serve are the very fabric of the church. Without them the structures come crashing down. As you/we reflect on the Spirit of Holiness we received in our ordination which was symbolised by the anointing of our hands with chrism, one thought is uppermost in our minds: even though we are a necessary part of the church we are nothing more than

the servants of Christ's people. We are not the corner stone, Christ is that, and that is why to begin to move towards the future we must walk with him and his disciples. Just as we feed our people with the Divine Food and serve their needs by bringing the people of God into being and giving it increase, so it is right that we learn with them how to increase in holiness. That is the challenge underlying the 'You are living stones' consultation. Ultimately it is not about reorganising our diocese but finding a way together with our people how we can continue to grow in holiness.

When my retreat was over and I met up with the priests of the diocese and my family and friends once more, some would say to me that I looked holy and that they could see my halo shining. I took this as a compliment and smiled in thanks. What I didn't say to them, and perhaps I should have done, is that I saw their halos shining brightly too.

Let us then not be afraid of being called holy.

+Malcolm McMahon OP

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