

Pastoral Perspective

A Night Unlike All Other Nights

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

I am using my column this week to publish the homily preached at the Chrism Mass in Canandaigua. The celebration amidst an overflow assembly is a memory I shall always cherish.

My dear family in Christ — gathered in a most representative assembly of the People of God from the Diocese of Rochester —

Today, all over the world, devout Jews, our ancestors in the worship of the One, True God, are celebrating their most cherished feast: the festival of faith and freedom known as the Passover. During the Seder meal, the family liturgy which commemorates Israel's emancipation, years of desert wandering and the final entry into the Promised Land, a heart-warming scene occurs when the youngest son asks the father four questions. Each question highlights the uniqueness of the occasion: "Why is this night unlike all other nights?" After all four questions have been answered, the members of the household are presumed to have a clear understanding of this uniquely beautiful family celebration.

Tonight, all over the world, devout Christians are at the midpoint of the most sacred and solemn week in their liturgical calendar. In the Diocese of Rochester, we have been called together from a 12-county area to celebrate in a very special way what is truly "a unique liturgy of our diocesan family." Our presence here affirms a special oneness-in-Christ, a family of faith gathered around its ordained father and leader. Our assembly is a sign that we are a **worshiping community**. At the close of tonight's liturgy, we will be missioned to the four compass points of the diocese. By our celebration of word and sacrament, our oneness-in-Christ will hopefully be even more deeply grounded. As we depart, our emphasis will shift: **from a community of worship to a community of witness**. We will be carrying back at least one new dimension of being: a renewed faith, a new relationship to ordination, the elements of newly consecrated oils for the service of our diocese at large, and a renewal of our commitment.

As the celebration of the Passover Seder calls for four basic questions to be answered, so, too, tonight's celebration can be approached in terms of four questions.

First Question: (Asked by Sister Margaret Mary Mattle, executive secretary of Diocesan Liturgical Commission.)

WHY ON THIS NIGHT DO WE CELEBRATE THIS CHRISM MASS, IN WHICH OILS ARE BLESSED AND CHRISM CONSECRATED?

Response: From ancient times the Chrism Mass has been one of the clearest expressions of the fullness of the bishop's priesthood, and a sign of the special unity of the priests with him. From about the fifth century until the liturgical renewal of Vatican II, the Chrism Mass was the only truly concelebrated Mass. It was an especially festive liturgy, celebrated in white vestments, with the **Gloria** resounding triumphantly throughout the Cathedral Church for the first time since the beginning of Lent. During the **Gloria** the bells were rung and then silence reigned until Holy Saturday. The ringing of the bells announced the Church's joy for the graces which would enrich her children through the use of holy oils in the year to follow.

In this concelebration of the Chrism Mass the bishop was surrounded by an extension of his priestliness, 12 priests, if available, who participated in the blessing with him; and at least for a time, each priest was attended by seven deacons and sub-deacons. Obviously, the entire ceremony was an eloquent expression of the presbyterate of the local Church, deriving its thrust and focus from the bishop of the diocese. Even today the Chrism Mass is always concelebrated. Priest representatives from various sections of the diocese concelebrate with the bishop, serving at once as witnesses and participants in the ministry of the Holy Chrism.

Three oils are blessed or consecrated, and each is used during the following year for the most sacred moments of Christian celebration or consecration. One — the most important — is the chrism. Another is the oil of catechumens. The third is the oil of the sick.

Chrism is used to anoint at baptism, at confirmation, at episcopal and priestly ordination, and at the consecration of sacred objects such as altars, chalices, bells and the blessing of baptismal water.

The oil of catechumens is used for baptismal exorcisms — to strengthen the candidate to renounce sin and the power of evil, before he approaches the font of life to be reborn in Christ. Since the Middle Ages the oil of catechumens has been used at the ordination of priests, for the anointing of kings, and for the blessing of baptismal water.

The oil of the sick is used as a remedy for the illness of mind and body, so that the recipient may have strength to bear sufferings and resist evil and obtain forgiveness of sins.

In brief, the symbolism of sacramental oil is extremely rich. Born of the rocky soil and nurtured by the sun, the humble and serviceable olive surrenders itself by being bruised and pressed. It effects its healing, strengthening, penetrating impact, touching the lives of rich and poor, healthy and sick, old and young, surrounding with consecration and celebration those special moments that highlight our common pilgrimage across this world to the Land of Eternal Promise.

Light and life, strength and suppleness, warmth and nourishment — such are the value and versatility of the lowly olive. And with the blessing of the Chrism Mass it becomes a vehicle of richest blessing from God our Creator, from Christ our anointed King and Priest.

Second Question: (Asked by John Firpo, student of St. Bernard's Seminary and a candidate for the Ordained Ministry.)

WHY ON THIS NIGHT HAVE WE BEEN INVITED TO CELEBRATE OUR ADMISSION TO CANDIDACY FOR THE ORDAINED MINISTRY?

Response: This rite, as you know, is meant to admit men to the body of candidates for eventual ordination as deacons and priests. In effect, this liturgical act is a preliminary, public statement of your intention to request ordination at some future date. I have welcomed the letters of intention sent to me by all the candidates.

Thus the rite is celebrated for candidates for the sacrament of Orders, candidates who have achieved a stability of purpose and a life-style which point to reasonable hope of effectiveness in the ordained ministry. The liturgy of admission to candidacy has spiritual, rather than juridical significance. Thus, while the act officially includes you among the clergy, the primary thrust is to ritualize your recognition of your readiness, and to ask the community to pray in behalf of this new and yet aspiring group now being apprenticed to the ranks of the ordained servants of the People of God.

Stability of purpose. Promise of effectiveness in ministry. Spirit of prayer. Concern for others. Love of God. Were not these the five elements which made the life and mission of Jesus an uninterrupted liturgy of love and service? Learn from your Master and Model! All your study in theology and pastoral skills and community service will have been in vain, unless you see in Him the basic example and the root inspiration for all your efforts in behalf of God's People.

It is my special prayer that, in the months — the years to come, you will make tonight's Scripture readings the source of your very special reflection. What greater responsibility can a servant of God have than to carry out his sense of mission as described by Is. 61:1-9, and to speak and live out God's word as we read in the Gospel of St. Luke 4:16-22?

Third Question: (John Evans, St. Patrick's, Owego, associate regional coordinator.)

WHY ON THIS NIGHT HAVE WE BEEN CALLED FROM THE VARIOUS PARTS OF THE DIOCESE TO RE-EXAMINE OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST, AND TO RE-COMMIT OURSELVES TO THE MINISTRY OF LOVING SERVICE?

Response: Within the last decade or so, largely through the inspiration of Our Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, a renewal of commitment to priestly service has been added to the ceremonies of the Chrism Mass. Because of Chrism Mass strongly highlights the unity and fraternity of the priesthood, this Liturgy was considered an ideal occasion for all who partake of the presbyterate to reaffirm their commitment to Christ, to priestly service, to priestly holiness. This act of renewal was especially appropriate whenever the Chrism Mass was concelebrated on Holy Thursday, the day traditionally linked with the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood.

However, because in addition to the ordained priesthood (or sacrament of Holy Orders), there is the common priesthood of all the faithful People of God, which is shared by reason of Baptism and Confirmation, it has been considered especially appropriate to use tonight's beautiful occasion to have our entire diocese — through its assembled representatives here — renew its dedication to Christ. Just as the Document on the Church in Vatican II begins with an overarching view of the entire People of God, before it takes up the consideration of the hierarchical structure of the Church, so it would seem appropriate that the entire diocese as the general priesthood of Christ might be the context in which the ordained ministry can best appreciate its role and function in the Church and reaffirm its special relationship to Christ.

Because, then, we are the community of faith, we must recommit ourselves together to the Source of our stability and security.

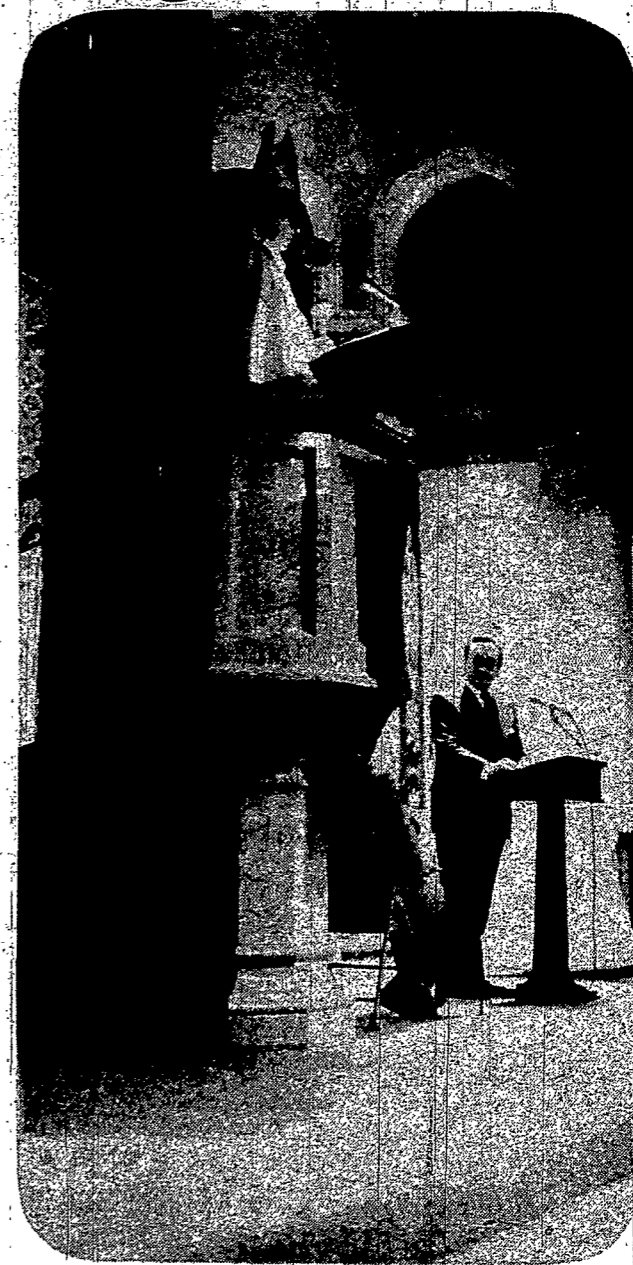
Because we are the People of God, we must reflect on what it means when He announces: "I shall be their God and Redeemer, and they shall be my People" (Ez 37:28; Is 41:14).

Because we are a new creation in Christ, we must reaffirm the fullness of life to which we have been called, and celebrate the memorial of his Eucharistic love.

Because the sacrifice of our Passover, Christ, has made us "priests of the Lord," "ministers of our God," as tonight's reading from Isaiah points out (Cf. Is 61:6), we must make public profession that we are truly the People of His Covenant Love.

In a word, we acknowledge with grateful hearts and tongues that "Jesus Christ is Lord," and to that truth we pledge all we have and are: our life, our love, our unremitting service.

Fourth Question: (Donald Jurusick, vice president, parish council, St. Casimir's, Elmira)



John Evans asks Bishop Hogan one of the formal questions during the homily.

WHY ON THIS NIGHT WILL WE BE GIVEN A MANDATE TO RETURN TO OUR RESPECTIVE PARISHES BEARING THE SACRED OILS?

Response: From biblical times oil has served as an outward sign of divine election. Anointing with oil was accompanied by the coming of the Spirit to take possession of the chosen one (Cf. Is 10:1-6; 16:13). This connection between anointing and the Spirit is at the origin of the basic symbolism of oil in the Christian sacraments. The holy oils give the Christian the multiform graces of the Holy Spirit — the same Spirit who made Jesus the uniquely Anointed One, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Not without reason was Jesus anointed by the overflowing Spirit on the occasion of his Baptism. His body was prepared for burial by the anointing in the house of Bethany. And on Resurrection morning, the holy women hastened to the grave to complete the act of burial with oil and spices.

It is to the image of God's Uniquely Anointed, Christ, that all Christians must be conformed. In all the sacraments in which blessed oil is used, the Christian is called upon to mirror Christ. Our anointing through the rites of the sacraments makes us ever and ever clearer images of God's special Anointed.

And thus, whether in baptism or in confirmation, whether in priestly ordination or in the anointing of the sick, it is the privilege of the Christian, like his Divine Master, to receive this anointing through which God communicates his special blessings.

By carrying back these sacred oils to your respective parish churches, you take part in the sacramental ministry of the whole diocese. You, parish representatives, are part of Christ's ongoing mission of strengthening and sanctifying, of healing and gladdening. This is your mandate tonight.

Finally, let me share two brief thoughts:

It is my sincerest desire that we will look upon this evening's liturgy as just one more in a series of signs, through which I wish to impress upon the diocese at large that we are The People of Renewal. All that God has done to and for us, must be validated and redirected by our personal renewal. We cannot become complacent about what God has done in former times. It is our responsibility to appropriate God's vision and mission for the Church of Rochester today, in our time, in our lives.

And, if I may make a humble plea, please say a prayer — however brief, let it be fervent — that your bishop may, with each passing day, be himself a Sign of God's renewing love among a people renewed. I ask only that your prayers be offered in my behalf, that as Teacher and Servant of all, I may be a genuine sign of Christ's loving presence among you.

More than that I cannot ask. Less than that I dare not!