

The Chrism Mass — 1976

[This Column is the homily I preached last evening in St. Peter and Paul Church, Elmira before an assembly of God's People gathered from every area of the Diocese.]

My dear friends, like Peter at the Transfiguration, I eagerly say, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." Each Holy Week I look forward to this evening when it becomes clearly visible that I am not just a busy administrator who must oversee a large corporation, but a concerned shepherd of a vibrant and caring flock. It is on a night like this when I see such diversity gathered in unity around the Lord's table that my faith in Church is strengthened and confirmed. This occasion so helps my faith in the Spirit God Who gathers His people

into Church, that I can once more stand before you (arrayed like the Joseph of the Old Testament in his Coat of Many Colors) and proclaim that we will — in fact, we can and we must — celebrate God's Love forever.

The love of God that we come together tonight to celebrate is a special love. It is ongoing and eternal. It is always present and continually faithful. And it is a love that evokes a response. The response is the response of God's people — a good and hopeful people, but a weak and faltering people. It, too, is called love. Let us reflect for a few minutes on the meaning of God's love and our response.

It is not without purpose that the Church asks us to celebrate the Chrism Mass during Holy Week. It is during this week that all Christians center on the essential meaning of God's love for all people. It is during this week that we realize once more that the love which God has for us is not shown simply by a kind word or an uninvolved action. It is a love that is willing to give — and give — until death. The love we celebrate tonight is love on the Cross.

A few minutes ago, we heard Isaiah speak of our mission: to bring glad tidings to the lonely, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive, to comfort those who mourn. But

this cannot be done by wishing. Nor can it be done only by hoping and praying that it will come about. It can only be done through paying the price, a willingness for each of us to mount the Cross of misunderstanding, frustration, anger, discouragement and condemnation. Remember, however, Jesus did not give us the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Instead, He said, "Do unto others as I have done to you." To expect to celebrate God's love without the Cross is foolishness.

Responding to such a love, a love which is willing to give totally for others, is not an easy task. The temptation might be to conclude that any response at all is impossible. How can weak, human, frail people ever respond to such a love. But, weakness is exactly the point. God's love for us is not a love based on what we could be. Rather it is a love based on what we are. The Church is not an organization of saints but rather a pilgrim group of sinners who are willing to admit that they are in need of God's grace and redemption. They are a group which Henri Nouwen calls "the fellowship of the weak." The true response of the Christian comes in a state of total vulnerability, a state in which a person is open to both giving and receiving. Such a group is aware of the human condition in which they live. "Love," says Henri Nouwen, "is not based on the willingness to listen to understand problems of others, or to tolerate their otherness. Love is based on the mutuality of the confession of our total self to each other. This makes us free to declare not only: 'My strength is your strength' but also: 'Your pain is my pain, your weakness is my weakness, your sin is my sin.' It is in this intimate fellowship of the weak that love is born. When the exposure of one's deepest dependency becomes an invitation to share this most existential experience, we enter a new area of life."

"The main witness of this message," he continues, "is Jesus, who in the exposure of His total vulnerability broke through the chains of death and found His life by losing it. He challenges us to break through the circle of our imprisonment. He challenges us to face our fellowman without fear and to enter with Him in the fellowship of the weak, knowing that it will not bring destruction but creation, new energy, new life, and — in the end — a new world."

We have come together then to celebrate God's love for us unto death and man's response in the fellowship of the weak. But as is so often the case in our celebrations, the Church does not simply leave us with words. Rather, she gives us rich symbols of the reality which she wishes us to consider. The symbol tonight is oil. What better symbol for our celebration than that which will be used all throughout the Diocese for the next year to strengthen, to heal, to confirm and to reconcile one Christian with another and all Christians with their God.

Every time a sacrament is celebrated, God's love is celebrated by His weak people. Baptism brings the new Christian out of the chaos of the human condition into the harmony of God's Kingdom. Confirmation and Holy Orders call forth Christians to a ministry of healing and reconciling, to a ministry that does not pit the powerful against the weak, but asks those who are weak to help others who are equally weak. The Sacrament of the Sick gives strength and healing to those who are physically weak or near death. Each time the oils are used they will symbolize God's grace and strength, God's healing and reconciliation for the people that He loves in their weakness.

I began this talk this evening by referring to Peter's comment at the Transfiguration. It is indeed good for us to be here. But I must warn you that we cannot fall into the temptation of remaining on the mountain in the afterglow of this joyful celebration. If we, in fact, recognize God's love for us on a Cross and man's fellowship of the weak, then we must go out from here putting our belief into action. We must begin with one another. We must admit to one another that no one of us is more powerful than the other; rather each of us is weak and in need of God's healing. We must be willing to accept the pain of our humanity and be reconciled with one another. In our parishes we must not only celebrate the sacraments with word and symbol, but go on to action that will really proclaim the love of God and the strength He gives to those in the fellowship of the weak. Our challenge is to take what we glimpse tonight and with God's help, make it a reality for all persons. It is only then that we can honestly say to God: We do indeed celebrate your love forever.



From Ashes to Easter

The "Ashes to Easter" program at St. Salome's consisted of special liturgies and discussion meetings, but out of it somehow came two works of art — symbols of spiritual refreshment.

William Bartholomay, a carpenter, produced a nine-foot cross, rough-hewn, doweled at the angles.

It will be carried into the church Good Friday in two pieces, to be put together during the Gospel.

Mary and Ray Wille made a "tapestry" 6 1/2 by 3 feet in orange and yellow, green and blue yarns, worked on canvas in a punch-needle technique. The distinctly medieval-looking figure of the

Risen Christ was taken from a missalette drawing, which Rosemary Trenkler, artist, had enlarged for transfer to the canvas. At the end of Easter, the decoration will be taken down from behind the altar and hung in the new con-

fession room.

The people of St. Salome's "really prepared, throughout Lent," according to Father Francis Blighton, priest intern. The Trappists at Piffard prayed for them meanwhile,

and in return, about 35 parishioners joined in the night prayers Saturday at the Abbey of the Genesee.

At 7:30 tonight, at St. Salome's there will be a service of general penance and absolution.

Photo by Susan McKinney