

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Homily for the Chrism Mass, April 5, 1977

Good liturgy is something more than theology, drama, ritual, symbol and a gathering of people. Good liturgy happens when truth, beauty and joy converge in an experience that makes life, under God, deeper, richer, clearer, freer, fuller. Good liturgy, at its most radical level, engenders "enthusiasm," which is a capacity for God's presence realized in daily living.



Tonight's celebration promises to be good liturgy on the strength of four dimensions: the power of the two scriptural readings, the beautiful rite of consecrating oils, the prayerful

renewal of our commitment, and the significance of our coming together as the People of God of the Church of Rochester.

Beyond presiding as main concelebrant, my most valuable contribution to this evening's celebration will be in the form of homiletic reflection on those very points. Before I do so, however, I need to acknowledge the contributions of several others. Therefore, I express my sincerest thanks to the staff of the Department of Liturgy for working out the many details of this year's Chrism Mass. Thanks, too, to Monsignor Cuffney, his staff and the liturgical committee of this and surrounding parishes for their whole-hearted cooperation in making this occasion possible and even memorable. Thanks, too, to my Auxiliary Bishops, my diocesan staff family, my secretary, whose presence makes the occasion all the more enjoyable to me. Thanks, too, to the Regional Coordinators, the large number of our clergy (both diocesan and religious). Thanks, too, to the significant number of seminarians, ushers, and the especially beautiful choir assembled for this occasion. Thanks, finally, to the representatives of the various parishes of our far-flung diocese, who beyond their own presence are a visible reminder of the length, breadth and depth of the bond of love that makes and keeps us together as a community of faith.

In tonight's first reading we are reminded of King David's oath in behalf of his son Solomon. Calling together Solomon's supporters, the great shepherd-king asks that the king-to-be be mounted on David's own royal beast, be escorted to the holy place of Gihon and there, observing the ritual of anointing, be recognized as his successor. It does not require an extraordinary imagination to picture for ourselves the elaborate procession, the fanfare and the acclamation, the invitation to be anointed as one chosen by God for a special and sacred purpose, and finally the feasting and rejoicing that accompanied the enthronement of a king. No wonder the sacred writer here indulges in hyperbole in the very last verse: "And all the people came up after him, and the people piped with pipes, and rejoiced with great joy, so that the earth rent with the sound of them." (1 Kgs. 1:40)

While our own liturgy is not a celebration of royal succession, nor is our rejoicing exactly the sound heard around the world, we do resonate to the unbounded gladness of people who gather to recognize

God's will for themselves and pledge their best to His work.

In the second reading we have heard once again the magnificent Prologue to the fourth Gospel. This meditation contains the deepest truth about God's Word — which is light and life — become incarnate and sharing with us the human condition. At the very heart of this passage there radiates the message that the divinity of God has anointed the humanity of Jesus. In turn the fullest blessings earned by the Lord Jesus have flowed out from him and anointed the human race in a new consecration to the revealed purpose of God.

In the context of this Chrism Mass, this introduction to the Fourth Gospel describes a cascading effect: the pre-existent life and light that are the Word of God flow upon and transform Jesus as Son of the Father, and the grace and truth and glory that the Incarnate Savior has and is, in turn flow upon and transform all "to whom he has given power to become children of God. Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received." (1:12, 16)

The second dimension of our celebration has to do with the consecration of oils. In the Bible there are over 450 references to oil, olive trees, ointments and anointing. Because the culture of our North Temperate Zone is somewhat removed from this feature — and even more than feature, way of life, it is rather difficult for us to appreciate the centrality of this thought pattern. Therefore, it would help us understand the reality and the symbolism of oil and anointment, if we briefly reviewed its uses in the biblical lands.

Oil was used, with grain and wine, as one of the three main staples of diet. Oil was used most frequently in the biblical experience for anointing, the anointing of a king (1 Sm 10:1), a priest (Lv 8:30), even a prophet (Is 61:1). Anointing oil was called the "oil of gladness," because it evoked the joy and gladness of commitment to God's purpose for his people in each of these rituals. Oil was used as part of the continual burnt offering. Oil was the chief fuel for lamps — the basic response to the darkness that engulfed the world in the pre-electric age. Oil was widely used in healing, to soften the wound (Is 1:6), to cleanse the skin-break, to ease the pain. Beyond all these, oil was used as a cosmetic, as a sign of hospitality, in the process of preparing a body for burial. It is easy to see how the use of the olive tree and its fruit for food, fuel, light, carpentry, ointments, medicine, sacrifice, burial, touched virtually every phase of daily life.

For those of us who have not reflected deeply on this point, it may come as something of a surprise to realize that four out of our seven sacraments use oil: baptism, confirmation, orders, and the anointing of the sick.

This should make immediately clear the significance of the Chrism Mass: namely, an occasion of high celebration in which one of the substances essential to the sacramental system of the Church is set apart, consecrated and distributed to the entire local Church. In this way the Chrism Mass marks the starting point for all of the sacramental anointings that we as a community of faith will be celebrating over the next year. Rallying around its chief shepherd,

the diocese expresses its sacramental solidarity by designating and consecrating the oils it will use in its most sacred liturgical celebrations for the next year of grace. To put the celebrations of sacramental anointing in even sharper focus, we, as the body of Christ, prepare these consecrated oils in the context of the Eucharistic body. In the long and the short of it, this is the fundamental reason why we are here tonight at Eucharist, anticipating the sacramental rhythms of the diocese, from the perspective of the holiest week of the year.

Having said that, I find it easy to move to the final two points of this homily. What is more natural than a ceremony of renewal on such an occasion? Our very presence affirms the faith we invest in the sacraments we celebrate. Our listening, responding, singing, reflecting and praying are expressions of love for and belief in that Spirit of Christ that will be poured out whenever this year, wherever in this diocese, a believer in the Lord Jesus will become a mini-reflection of Christ, the Anointed of the Lord. In fact, the notion of anointing is inextricably bound up in the very term, Christian. Tonight, as we anticipate those anointings which make or enhance us as Christians, we, re-commit ourselves to God who calls us to holiness and to one another as brothers and sisters grounded in the holiness of the Lord Jesus. The commitment rite tonight invites us to celebrate our own sacramental anointings in the Anointed of the Lord, Jesus the Christ. In the Anointed (Christ) we have been anointed (Christians).

Finally, a word about the size, the scope and the significance of this congregation. We stand shoulder to shoulder with one another, and face to face with the God of our faith and hope and love as the People of God of the Church of Rochester. Whatever the contingencies of birth, culture, education, geography, marital status, occupation that divide us, we find a common denominator in our one shared faith. When we realize that inner city and outer city parish, urban and rural parish, campus and institution-related parish, hospital and health-care community — whatever the worshipping community from which we come — are all represented here, there is signaled forth a corporate sign of the diocese at worship. We, though many, are one. For all of our diversity, we express and embody the unity that is the Lord among us.

Let me go back for a moment to the closing of the Gospel reading for those final three verses say it much better than I ever can.

Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received — yes, grace in return for grace, since, though the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ, No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (Jn 1:16-18)

It is my very special prayer that through the knowledge offered to us by the only begotten Son, we will truly experience the height and the depth, and most especially the nearness, of the Father's heart.

Liberty and Duty in the Christian Life

Following is Pope Paul's message at his general audience of March 16.

The passing of Lent and the progress of the wise pedagogy of its liturgy, induce us, almost compel us to reflect on the central issue of this extraordinary period, a real peak point of the spirit: repentance. We are called to repent, to do penance. In this leit-motif, the Church, from her remote antiquity, has developed a whole plentitude of theological, spiritual and moral motives, which is expressed in the liturgical rites, as in the preaching of the great Fathers, with the intention precisely of preparing hearts for repentance; and it is well known that the period of Lent was the prelude to the conferring of Baptism and to the reconciliation of sinners in Penance.

In so doing, the Church merely continued the great message of Revelation, by means of which God called men to enter into communion with Him and to break those chains that prevented them from moving along

the way to it. For it is a question of moving along the way: repentance is a moving backwards, so to speak, as the Hebrew verb sub indicates (to take, a different path, to reverse, to turn back). It is a deep and marvellous idea that imbues the pages of the Old Testament, particularly the Prophets who raise their voices to call the rebellious people to return to God, as Isaiah does with burning words: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice"; or, as Jeremiah, the prophet of repentance par excellence, promises: "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart."

This voice becomes a prayer in the Psalms. Do you remember the Miserere?: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 50, 10). This cry is re-echoed, in all its strength, by the Forerunner in the time of Christ. Jesus himself will make it the resounding sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God, nay more, the first condition to enter the new order of salvation, which He comes to establish in the world: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

Jesus came to call sinners to repent: the publicans, the sinful woman, the good thief are the living sign of this possibility, this reality of rehabilitation, which the Son of God offers mankind, fallen on account of sin. It is necessary to be born again, it is necessary to become like children. Just think of the force of sanctification that the last word had for a very great soul of modern times, Theresa of Lisieux!

We would never stop recalling evangelical words and events to shed light on the meaning and value of this repentance, this penitence, this metanoia, which is precisely an inner change, taking another way, returning to the Father's arms, as the parable of the son who returns describes visually in incomparable tones. As we well understand from Jesus' clear teachings, the aim is a deep change, in two directions.

In the first place, to change one's way of thinking, one's outlook, the deep motives of action; and just think what a difficult change it is, if it involves the most secret and deepest personality of each of us. In the second place, it is a question also of changing one's concrete conduct, behavior, way of acting, in order that our exterior actions will correspond without any more blatant contrasts with the interior revolution, which has taken place in the spirit.

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