

Annual Chrism Mass celebrated

By Teresa A. Parsons

Since the 5th century, Christians have celebrated the healing and consecrating ministries of the Church with the Chrism Mass.

On Tuesday evening, March 25, Bishop Matthew H. Clark continued that tradition at Sacred Heart Cathedral, celebrating the annual Mass at which holy oils used in rituals throughout the year are blessed and distributed. This year's theme was reconciliation.

Bishop Clark was assisted by Bishops Joseph L. Hogan and Dennis W. Hickey, along with more than 15 diocesan priests and Deacon Kenneth Scarciotta.

Representatives from virtually every parish community in the diocese participated in the Mass and received the newly blessed oils to take back to their churches.

Although it is called the Chrism Mass, chrism is actually only one of three types of holy oil blessed by the bishop. Oil of Catechumens and Oil of the Sick are also prepared for the coming year.

Oil has long been used for symbolic reasons that, at least to the Israelites and early Christians, were obvious. In Greek, the word Chrism means "the anointed one." Likewise, the Hebrew word "Messias" means anointed one.

Oil as salve was used to soothe and comfort the physical pain of those who were sick — thus the use of oil in anointing the sick to relieve sorrow and suffering, both physical and spiritual.

To our ancestors, oil also represented suppleness and steadfast strength of athletes and warriors.

As an ingredient in many foods, oil represented a nourishing substance that can be seen to fortify Christians in their journeys of faith.

Chrism is usually a mixture of pure olive oil and balm or balsam. Mixing together the two substances recalls the unity of humanity and divinity in Jesus. Perfumed oil or oleum gaudii (the oil of gladness) reflects the

sweetness of a righteous life and freedom from sin or corruption.

Just as the Israelites used perfumed oil to anoint their kings and prophets and to sanctify objects they wished to make holy, chrism is used to consecrate bishops, anoint the hands of priests at ordination, consecrate churches, altar stones, chalices, patens, the solemn blessing of bells, and the blessing of baptismal water.

In the present day, those who are baptized and confirmed are also anointed as full members of a "royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart."

Historically, oil provided light as fuel for lamps. Symbolically, it represents the "energy" needed to nourish the light of a Christian life burning.

As a penetrating substance that leaves a lasting mark, oil represents a purification and permanency of commitment, whether in baptism, confirmation or ordination.

Together, oil and water signify a fullness of grace. Washing with water, anointing with oil and laying on of hands all came to be associated with entrance into the fullness of Christian life — thus their use in Christian initiation rites.

Olive oil was chosen for the symbolism of the olive as fruitful and ever-green. Hope and peace are recalled by the olive branch, with which the dove returned to Noah and the Ark.

In 1971, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship published a directive that allowed the use of other oils, such as vegetable, seed or coconut oil, rather than olive oil. Before 1971, bishops had also been required to celebrate the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday. The congregation granted bishops permission to bless the oils at other times and to extend the right of blessing to priests when necessary.

Bishop Hogan implemented the directive in 1973, moving the Chrism Mass to Tuesday of Holy Week.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Bishop Matthew H. Clark pours the fragrant balsam into the vessel to be mixed with chrism. Holding the vessel are Robin Whiteman, candidate for confirmation, and Bishop Dennis W. Hickey.



Robin Whiteman of Transfiguration Parish in Pittsford and Deacon Gary Tyman of Good Shepherd Parish, Henrietta, place the vessel of holy oils on a table.



From left, Bishops Dennis W., Hickey, Matthew H. Clark, and Joseph L. Hogan gathered for the annual Chrism Mass.

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