

“The Physical Realities that Mediate God’s Saving Presence”

Homily for Chrism Mass, 2020

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Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption

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Introduction

It is said that you do not really appreciate something until you are deprived of it. What we are deprived of these days certainly gives us a renewed appreciation of what is most dear to us as Catholics. Perhaps it was something too easy for us to overlook, to not even notice, but now not being able to come together in the same physical space to worship makes us realize just how much the practice of our faith is inextricably wrapped up in gathering together.

Gathering

In this sense we are living out what we have inherited from our Jewish ancestors in the faith. Notice what our Lord does when he returns to his hometown to make the solemn announcement that the prophecies of old have been fulfilled: “he went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.”

He went *into the synagogue*. Already by the time of our Lord, the synagogue had become a focus for Jewish life: a meeting hall, a place of prayer, a house of study. And Jesus’ presence in the synagogue would recur in his public ministry. He would continue to go there to preach and teach on the Sabbath, and sometimes to work miraculous healings.

Moreover, he went *on the Sabbath day*. The synagogue isn’t just any kind of a gathering place, it is a house of worship. And so our churches, too, are not any kind of gathering place, but a sacred space, where God’s word is proclaimed and Christ’s sacrifice is renewed and made present to us. The sadness we feel at not being able to come together this year for these most sacred days should be a powerful reminder to us that, far more than an obligation, keeping the Sabbath holy by Sunday Mass is a privilege. What an awesome privilege God has given us to worship Him, to hear His word and receive the Body and Blood of His Son in the sacrifice of the Eucharist.

Oil of Gladness

What we are about today in particular at this Chrism Mass is a reminder of something else central to our faith that we can easily take for granted: physical reality. The sacramental life of the Church uses the tangible, the audible, and human touch to reveal and make present God’s saving action. And so once again this year oil will be blessed and consecrated for the anointing of God’s people.

From ancient times oil has been used as an ointment to perfume the body and soothe wounds; the Bible sings of its power to strengthen the limbs. It was used as fuel for lamps and so seen as a source of light. Thus oil came to be seen as a sign of divine favor and of salvation.

In the spiritual realm, oil is used for anointing: for anointing God's people to form them into a kingdom of priests for God our Father which we heard about in our second reading from the Book of Revelation; for anointing priests to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass through which God gives us the great privilege of entering into the reality of His Son's Paschal Mystery; and for anointing the altar and walls of the church – physical objects – to set them apart as a sacred space or object for sacred use.

Oil, though, is also used for anointing the sick. Indeed, it is a special oil set aside just for this purpose. Of all the dire straits in which people can find themselves, only the sick have a special sacrament with a special oil designated just for them. During this time of pandemic, we are aware more than ever of our responsibility to show compassion to the sick, and how dear they are to us. They reveal to us the spiritual state of humanity, which can only be healed and made whole by the oil of gladness which is God's favor, that is, living in God's grace. I want to take this opportunity, then, to thank those who are giving of themselves, even at risk to their own health, to showing compassion to the sick: healthcare workers; first responders; those attending to the homeless, and in particular, our own Catholic Charity workers who are exhausting themselves to attend to the homeless on the streets, delivering them food and transporting them where they need to go. I especially want to offer a word of profound gratitude to our hospital chaplains who are doing everything possible to offer the spiritual consolation of the sacraments to the sick and dying in very precarious circumstances. May God reward you for your selfless generosity in caring for those who are near and dear to His heart.

Conclusion

Finally, I wish to offer a word of thank to all of our beloved priests. Allow me to repeat to you my deep appreciation for all you are doing to give your people support, consolation, hope and pastoral presence while we continue to “shelter in place.” Your pastoral creativity is a sign of the vibrant faith and vision of our local church. We come together both physically and remotely on this Holy Thursday, a day that we often regard as our common anniversary of ordination, as it is the day on which our Lord instituted the ministerial Priesthood. Let us remember to always be thankful to God for the privilege and responsibility He has given us, with all of the joys and sufferings it entails. God loves a cheerful giver, and, in keeping with our Lord's promise, we can rest assured that God will grant an eternal reward to His good and faithful servants.