

Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez of St. Augustine
Chrism Mass of Holy Week
March 26, 2013

The Chrism Mass is anchored on Holy Thursday but for practical reasons it is anticipated this morning to gather a large number of priests and deacons and parish delegations to this annual Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine that celebrates the unity of the Diocese of St. Augustine.

In this Mass, the holy oils are most important. I experience delight in parish visitations when I see the triple oils displayed with honor, visibility and prominence. I rejoice when asking the youth, and hearing their explanation of the meaning of the letters of each oil container and its unique use in pastoral care.

The oils are important signs for the sacraments of the Church. In its noble simplicity, the oils are an instrument of God who acts on our behalf through them. These gifts of Creation serve for the personal history of salvation of our communities of faith.

In our culture, oil has multiple uses: it is so important for cooking. It gives beauty to the body; it heals and protects our skin. When priests and bishops are consecrated, oil is used in continuity with a long cultural tradition going back to the installation of ancient kings and priests. In this context, oil signifies mission and responsibility. As prophet Isaiah stated, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me...”

In a most special way, oil relates to Jesus Christ. He is the anointed one, the Messiah. This is so important for us priests because as I mentioned at last year’s Chrism Mass, the ministerial priests are sharers of the anointing of the only one priest, Jesus Christ. It makes so much sense also that the baptized are the anointed ones – Christian is our name and the lay faithful are therefore sharers of the priesthood of the faithful.

There was also a time in the Church when the Holy Spirit was called “the Chrism;” indeed the Spirit is the oil of gladness – given in abundance to Jesus Christ! As Psalm 44 states, “your love is for justice, your hatred for evil. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness over other kings.” (Ps. 44, 8)

Our Catholic life is touched by oil in a most significant way. We received it first in our baptism (both oils of the catechumens and the holy chrism) and in confirmation. We receive the benefit of the priests’ ministry thanks to their anointing by the bishop, and in times of grave sickness we receive the oil of the sick, there God, the true physician, strengthening us and healing us from infirmities.

Concerning the oil of the sick, Hippolytus writes, “If anyone offers oil, let him [the bishop] give thanks in the same way as for the offering of bread and wine [not using the same words but expressing the same idea] and say, ‘Lord, just as by sanctifying this oil, with which you anointed kings, priests and prophets, you give holiness to those who are anointed with it and receive it, so let it bring comfort to those who taste of it and health to those who use it.’”

As the Apostle St. James reminds us, “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the priests of the Church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. (James 5:14-15)

Let us today acknowledge the dedicated service of our priests to the care of the sick. At any time, day and night, priests become available to calls from hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities to pray and give the sacrament to those who are gravely sick. Some we know regain health by the power of the anointing; others are consoled and comforted by the prayers and the care of a shepherd. We are also blessed by hundreds of deacons, Eucharistic ministers, parish volunteers who visit the sick assuring them they are not cases but beloved brothers and sisters of the greater family of the parish.

We all know that the early Christians decorated their tombs with an olive branch motif. The biblical image of the dove holding a branch of oil at the end of the flood was a consoling image in times of great sorrow.

St. Augustine and the Fathers of the Church have preached often about the Holy Spirit as the oil of gladness. As the Gospel of St. Luke today states: **“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.”** This gladness reflects the joy of Jesus in doing his mission in the midst of suffering, persecution, constant rebukes because the joy of the Spirit can coincide with great suffering.

The poor, as Pope Francis has referenced were first among Jesus’ outreach. The practice of stewardship delivers many resources of time and talent and treasure on behalf of the needy here and in mission fields. There is such a joy in realizing that the poor are not at the margins but at the center of our care.

A pastor in our diocese repeats often that a Christian must be recognized by joy. Whether one is an optimist or a pessimist by temperament, we are all called to be hopeful in joy. Christian joy is a fruit of the Spirit and it is not diminished by adversities, challenges and losses.

I recently joined with the community of Christ the King in Jacksonville in the blessing of the new plaza of the Paschal mystery. The remarkable and unique bronzed image of the Crucified Christ conveys the physical horror of his passion. But at the same time, a theme of victory emerges expressed in the body of the Crucified; it enables the seer to capture the victory of the Risen Lord ...a joy transfigured in spite of the most visible atrocious pain.

The paschal mystery is the core of the sacred triduum which begins with this evening’s Vespers, of the entire Holy Week and the paschal mystery is also the source of the whole liturgical year. The Paschal mystery is the core message of hope of the new evangelization.

Come; live in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! Who is our lasting hope and our enduring joy. Come always to the Eucharist which makes the paschal mystery present and real here and now.