

“The Grace of Communion that Restores Friendship with God”
Homily for Chrism Mass
By Most Rev. Salvatore Cordileone, Archbishop of San Francisco
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Introduction

“Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” In the Gospel we just heard proclaimed, Jesus ascribes to himself this prophecy from the prophet Isaiah. In Jesus this prophecy is fulfilled. He is the anointed one who sets the captives free and brings Good News to the poor. But do we really believe this?

Gospel of Communion

As we look around and see what is happening in the world – violent religious persecution in the Middle East and elsewhere, attacks on people in our own country because of religious beliefs, race, and, especially, legal status – do we really believe that there is any Good News?

Jesus says that it is of him that Isaiah prophesied the Spirit of the Lord would anoint. And he is very dramatic in the way he proclaims it. Notice how St. Luke describes the scene: “Rolling up the scroll, [Jesus] handed it back to the attendant *and sat down*, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.” Jesus makes a point of sitting down to emphasize the authority with which he delivers this teaching, the position of sitting being symbolic of teaching authority. We can recall, for example, that Jesus went up the mountain and then *sat down* to pronounce the Sermon on the Mount. Of course, we would take him seriously in any event, but he is making a very strong point here. So how do we make sense of his Good News in a world filled with so much suffering, fear and confusion?

Let’s begin with the tradition of Jesus’ own people: in the Old Testament, kings and priests were the ones anointed for their office by the ritual pouring of holy oil upon their head. Jesus, the one who rules over us and sanctifies us, is our Head. The oil that will be blessed and consecrated at our Mass tonight will be used to incorporate us into his Body, of which he is the Head and we are the members under him, our Head.

- The *Oil of Catechumens* is used in anticipation of the catechumens' Baptism, which will mark their definitive incorporation into the Body of Christ.
- The *Sacred Chrism* is the Holy Oil used in that sacrament of Baptism, as well as in the other initiation sacrament closely connected to it, Confirmation. Those being initiated receive this anointing on their head, to signify that they take their place under Christ our Head and acknowledge him as their true King.
- The *Oil of the Sick* indicates the special status that the sick have in the Church, counted among those poor to whom Christ came to proclaim Good News, and whom he came to set free.

The sick remind us of the suffering Christ, who took on all of our infirmities. As St. Paul teaches, he who was without sin took on sin for our sake, to nail it to the Cross once for all. He was without sin, but freely took on the condition of fallen humanity. The physical condition of the sick, then, symbolizes for us the spiritual condition of all of humanity as deprived of God's friendship.

Yes, the world is a place of suffering. But this is because of our rejection of God. This is what brings about the loss of friendship with God. It is our own doing, and always results in suffering. But, when has the world not been this way? It doesn't, though, have to be that way. The Good News is that God got us out of this mess in which we got ourselves, precisely because we could not do it ourselves. And so, it doesn't always have to be that way. What we do tonight, the purposes for which these Oils will be used, give us access back to friendship with God. That is truly Good News. Yes, thanks to God's initiative, we can live as friends of God. When we do that, living as members of one Body in and under Christ, we see the Good News with our own eyes and experience it in our hearts.

This means nothing more than living out the communion of faith that we share in Christ. When we live in communion, the suffering of others brings us together in Christ. Through us, then, Christ can act: fear dissipates, loneliness vanishes, the shackles of oppression are unbound. This is Good News, this is true freedom in Christ. This is communion in action, otherwise known as solidarity: all share in the sufferings and joys

of the one. Just as a body, when it is injured, rushes blood to the injured part and focuses all of its energy on it so that it may be healed and the whole body restored to full functioning, so it is with the Body of Christ and the functioning of its various members.

Priests: The Lifeblood of the Church

The Sacred Chrism has an added meaning as well. Because of its association with Holy Thursday, this Mass of Chrism also carries with it a focus on the office of the priest. It was in that upper room on that first Holy Thursday that Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper – and with it, therefore, the Priesthood.

If the Holy Eucharist is the sacrament of our Communion, then the Priesthood can likewise be seen as a sacrament of Communion, or, as the Instruction on the Formation of Priests *Pastores dabo vobis* puts it, the priest is a man of communion. The priest is the one who is the link in the communion of the Church, binding together the faithful under their Head. Just as the blood permeates the whole body to keep the body healthy to the very last cell, so are priests for the Church. Priests are truly the lifeblood of the Church.

It is this functioning in communion, of which priests are indispensable, that keeps the Church healthy and effective in her mission. As that Instruction on Priestly Formation puts it:

... precisely because within the Church's life the priest is a man of communion, in his relations with all people he must be a man of mission and dialogue. Deeply rooted in the truth and charity of Christ, and impelled by the desire and imperative to proclaim Christ's salvation to all, the priest is called to witness in all his relationships to fraternity, service and a common quest for the truth, as well as a concern for the promotion of justice and peace [PDV, n. 18].

That is why priests have their hands anointed with the Sacred Chrism at their ordination. Their hands are anointed to do the work of Christ, the work that only Christ

can do for the sanctification of his people. The priest is conformed to Christ at his ordination, and the more he is united to him the more he brings his people with him into communion with their Head. In a few moments, the priests of our Archdiocese will renew their priestly promises, resolving “to be more united with the Lord Jesus and more closely conformed to him, denying [them]selves and confirming those promises about sacred duties towards Christ’s Church which ... [they] willingly and joyfully pledged on the day of [their] priestly ordination.”

Those sacred duties first and foremost mean providing access to the grace of the sacraments for God’s people, both in the sense of preparing them for the sacraments and celebrating the sacraments for them. But it also involves the broader pastoral perspective which all that entails, walking with their people to a deeper understanding and love of the truth of Christ, and leading them to receiving and sharing his love and mercy with others. Without priests, the Church can have no communion. Without priests, the Church simply could not exist. I want to take this opportunity, then, to thank the priests of our Archdiocese for being the lifeblood of the Church for our people here in our local church. In their priestly ministry they bring the sacramental grace of Christ’s forgiveness, healing, and freedom and peace to his people.

Conclusion

Jesus does fulfill for us the Good News. Despite sufferings, setbacks, fears and hardships, God is with us. God is with us through it all. May the Holy Oils we bless and consecrate tonight be for us truly the oil of gladness, opening for us the floodgates of sacramental grace by which Christ, through the ministry of priests, restores us to friendship with God, now and forever in heaven. Amen.