

“Dying with Christ to Become His Oil of Gladness, Mercy and Light”

Homily for Chrism Mass

March 17, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Introduction

It is sometimes said among gourmet enthusiasts and other aficionados of all things pertaining to fine cuisine that the two signs of true civilization are the grape and the olive. No surprise there, for they know better than anyone else how essential wine and olive oil are to a pleasant experience at the table, which in turn helps to cement bonds of fellowship and good will.

Obviously, wine and oil take on a sacred character in the sacramental life of the Church. The Church has happily received these two elements from her ancient Mediterranean roots, where wine and oil carried significance in everyday life beyond that which it has for even the most discriminating of palates in our own time.

Meaning of Wine and Oil, Both Practical and Symbolic

Wine, of course – as in our own time – was used for celebrations, and so expressed merriment and everything pleasant in life: friendship, human love, and, in general, all joy that one experiences on earth. We can think, for example, of the Wedding Feast of Cana, and Psalm 104, which praises God for giving wine to gladden the human heart. In the ancient world wine was also used for medicinal purposes. So, Jesus used wine at the Last Supper, instituting the Eucharist, not only as a memorial of his bloody Sacrifice by which he heals us from sin and death but also to remind us that his Sacrifice is the source of eternal joy.

Oil in the ancient world, as in our own time, was used for nourishment. In addition, it, too, had a medicinal value, as it was used to soothe wounds. It also signified beauty, as it perfumed the body and was used to make the face shine; thus, it, too, acquired the symbolic meaning of gladness. It also signified strength for battle, and, as kings and priests were anointed with oil, it especially became a sign of dignity and responsibility and likewise of the strength that comes from God. And besides all of this, oil played a critical role in providing light in the darkness, as it was used to fuel lamps. We can think, for example, of the parable of the ten virgins in the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, five of them wise and five foolish. The wise ones brought oil for their lamps, so they were able to go out and greet the bridegroom with their lamps lit when he came in the middle of the night.

Our Mass this evening is very much about the grape and the olive – the blessing and consecrating of oil to be used in the rites of the Church for anointing God's people, within the context of the Eucharist.

Wine of Forgiveness, Oil of Mercy

Bear in mind, though, that before becoming wine and oil, the grape and the olive must first be crushed. This is what our Savior came to do for us. As we will hear in the first reading for Good Friday, taken from one of the Suffering Servant Songs of the Prophet Isaiah, God's anointed one "was crushed for our sins." The spilling of Jesus' blood on the Cross is the outpouring of God's forgiveness. We just heard him proclaim in the Gospel of St. Luke that the Spirit of God anointed him "to bring glad tidings to the poor." That means all of us, for we are all impoverished by our sins. Our Lord was crushed, like olives in the olive press, in order to bring us the healing balm and sweet fragrance of God's mercy.

This, of course, carries an added special meaning for us this year, as we celebrate the Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis, and all the more so here in our Cathedral as this Cathedral church is designated as one of the four sites in the Archdiocese to have a dedicated Holy Door through which the faithful may gain the Holy Year indulgence.

In his Chrism Mass homily six years ago, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of the connection between oil and mercy in ancient times, noting the similarity in the two corresponding words in Greek: "*elaion*" meaning oil and "*eleos*," mercy. He also makes an allusion to the parable of the ten virgins, subtly urging us to be like the wise ones in keeping our lamps lit brightly. He says:

In ... the various sacraments, consecrated oil is always a sign of God's mercy. So the meaning of priestly anointing always includes the mission to bring God's mercy to those we serve. In the lamp of our lives, the oil of mercy should never run dry. Let us always obtain it from the Lord in good time – in our encounter with his word, in our reception of the sacraments, in the time we spend with him in prayer.

God's mercy is truly the light in our life, dispelling the darkness of our sin, of our foolishness, of all of our tendencies to self-alienation. And truly the practices he recommends to us – encountering God's word, participation in the sacramental life of the Church, spending time in prayer – keep us united with Jesus and organically united with his Body, the Church. It is thus that he makes "us into a Kingdom, [and] priests for his God and Father," in accordance with St. John's vision in the Book of Revelation. As Isaiah proclaims, he names us "priests of the Lord, ministers of our God," that is, a people anointed for the sanctification of the world.

Yes, we must persevere in those practices which keep us united to Jesus Christ, in those so many little ways in which we allow ourselves to be crushed with and for him, so that we might make of ourselves an acceptable offering in his sight.

Persecuted Christians

And yet, how truly little do those ways seem in comparison to so many of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East and other parts of the world who are literally being crushed with Christ, whose blood mingles with that of his as they unite the sacrifice of their lives to his atoning sacrifice to the Father. In these days we think especially of the four Missionary of Charity sisters killed in Yemen, where they ran a home for the elderly, along with a number of lay people who assisted them. In his Sunday Angelus address the Sunday after the massacre, Pope Francis referred to them as “the martyrs of today,” and he at once heralded their heroism and descried the source of their brutal demise as not only those who physically attacked them but also a global malaise that is cold-hearted and oblivious to such suffering. As he said: “They may not be on the cover of a magazine ... [they] may not even make the news, but they gave their blood for the Church. These people are victims of the attack of those who killed them and of indifference too, of this globalization of indifference, which does not care.”

Let us care. We are anointed to care, to stand in solidarity with those for whom the world does not care. Let us especially pray and advocate for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, and other religious minorities, heeding the plea of the bishops of our country and our state to make our voices heard. The killing must stop! And yet, as Pope Paul VI taught in his homily at the Canonization of St. Charles Lwanga and his companions, martyrs of Uganda in the 1880’s, we pray to God for an end to the killing, “although such a holocaust is precious indeed.” Those who win the martyr’s crown make of themselves the most precious offering of all in God’s sight.

Conclusion: Oil of Gladness

God created us for life. This, then, necessarily means a life beyond this life in this world, because this world is passing away; we have no permanent home here. This is the source of the joy that sustains us during the trials of this life. The oil blessed and consecrated here will be used to anoint God’s people: the sick, those under instruction, those whom he consecrates for His priestly people and ordains to be priests for them. This oil is the oil of gladness, of which the Scriptures speak.

In that same Chrism Mass homily in 2010, Pope Benedict referred to the Fathers of the Church who have given us the insight as to what this oil of gladness really is. I can do no better than to conclude with the words he spoke on this point:

... the oil of gladness is the Holy Spirit himself, who was poured out upon Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the gladness that comes from God. From Jesus this gladness sweeps over us in his Gospel, in the joyful message that God knows us, that he is good and that his goodness is the power above all powers; that we are wanted and loved by him. Gladness is the fruit of love. The oil of gladness,

which was poured out over Christ and comes to us from him, is the Holy Spirit, the gift of Love who makes us glad to be alive.

Since we know Christ, and since in him we know the true God, we know that it is good to be a human being. It is good to be alive, because we are loved, because truth itself is good.