

DIOCESE OF NORTHAMPTON



CHRISM MASS HOMILY

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the light of Jesus' words from the Prophet Isaiah with the good news that he has been anointed and sent to bring good news to the poor, I want to greet each one of you, priests, deacons, religious and Christ's faithful people, all members of the Body of Christ, with words of joy and with words of peace – the joy of the Gospel that all of us and all of creation is loved by God - and with the peace of the Lord that our loving Father is waiting to welcome us with open arms.

When there is so much that unsettles us, when there is so much uncertainty and when it is difficult to trust anyone, it is wonderful to be able to put our trust in God and experience God's joy and peace at the core of our being. That joy and that peace are yours as the consecrated Body of Christ. That, too, was the message of Pope Francis to the Bishops of England and Wales last September, and a message he asked us to pass on to you – joy and peace!

I pray that it will be with joy and peace in our hearts that we enter the Sacred Triduum, the solemn celebration of the Lord's Supper, of his Passion, and of his Resurrection. This Chrism Mass leads us into those sacred moments in our parishes. It is so good to see you all here, representing the whole community

of the Diocese in which the oils to be blessed and consecrated will be used at the Easter Vigil and during the coming year.

The Holy Oils remind us that we are a consecrated people, dedicated to the service of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ, by being faithful in our different vocations and at different stages in our lives. We live out our vocations, firstly, within our families and at work and then in the different ways we express our love for God in our neighbourhood and in the wider community.

As I visit the parishes around the Diocese, I am amazed by the time and energy and expertise of so many parishioners in the service of the Church and beyond from church cleaning to providing meals for the homeless. Countless people are engaged in the life and mission of the Church, and I want to acknowledge and thank all of you for your commitment and service. I would like to thank, too, all who work directly for you in the Diocese.

But we are so stretched in our communities. And, certainly - among our priests and deacons - there is a sense that we are “just managing”. Each year, after Easter and sometimes before, I pray and agonise about how we are going to cope in the coming year with fewer priests, knowing that I cannot meet, we cannot meet, the expectations of the parishes. I think that the Holy Spirit is prompting us to look for new ways to nourish our faith communities and promote a sense of mission even in our own families who have not time for faith and religion.

One step forward is lay chaplaincies in hospitals, prisons, universities and schools with proper training and support. However, in our country, lay people have only exercised a leadership in their parishes in an informal way. At my request, a group in the Diocese is exploring the possibility of a more formal lay leadership with the necessary training, in partnership with our priests and deacons. I think that this could be a positive way forward, moving us from “just managing” to “leading”. So, while lay leadership in our Diocese is not new, it is being developed, and we have some concrete ideas which are being rolled out through our Pastoral Area Councils.

Nothing of what I have just said will have any meaning unless all of us are people of faith and prayer, listening to Christ and his Spirit, Christ who loves us and has washed away our sins with his blood. That is what we celebrate at every Mass because, as we all know, the source and summit of our lives of faith is the Eucharist. Tonight we shall celebrate Christ's first Mass with his disciples and the institution of the Eucharist at the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

Also, at tonight's Mass, we shall celebrate the institution of the ministerial priesthood, and it is at this point that I want to go and speak directly with our priests.

(To all priests)

Dear Fathers and dear Brothers,

The instructions for the bishop at this Chrism Mass are very clear. This Mass is to be a manifestation of the communion of the priests with their bishop. Priests come together and concelebrate this Mass as witnesses and co-operators with their bishop in the consecration of the chrism because they share in the sacred office of the bishop in building up, sanctifying and governing the people of God. This Mass is, therefore, a clear expression of the unity of the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ which continue to be present in the Church. And, finally, the instruction states that, to show the unity of the college of priests, priests who concelebrate with the Bishop should come from different parts of the Diocese.

It is heartening to see so many of you, dear brother priests, from all parts of the Diocese, diocesan and religious, and you who come so generously from abroad to share in the mission of the local Church (and one or two of you who are visiting). Your presence and your ministry reflect the exciting and life-giving international make-up of our parishes.

I want to begin by thanking you for your generosity and patience in sustaining our communion together, and for your loyalty and care for me. And I want to thank you for your dedicated preaching of the Word and pastoral care of the communities entrusted to you. All but ten of you carry

responsibility for two or more churches or parishes. I am very conscious of the heavy demands on you, not least at a time when people can have their own individual agendas and needs. The words of today's Preface come to mind – "As they give up their lives for you and for the salvation of their brothers and sisters, they strive to be conformed to the image of Christ himself and offer you a constant witness of faith and love."

That desire to be conformed to the image of Christ can be dulled by fatigue and overwork and weakness which, in my case, begins with my personal prayer slipping, usually because there is so much to do and burning the candle at both ends – you know the pattern – and there is no one to tell us to stop. If you do get into a pickle or if you know a brother priest is struggling, do look for support from a fellow priest or from me. We are all human. None of us is perfect and how much we need our communion together to be real especially when things go pear-shaped! And there is help available in our Diocesan Offices, in HR and Finance, schools, Chaplaincy, Youth and Catechetics to provide support especially if you are doing everything on your own – your successor will not thank you!

Just as personal prayer is essential, so is the prayer of the Mass, both for ourselves and for our communities. Because the Mass timetable is relentless and routine, please do a health check on the devotion and faith with which you celebrate Mass. And please check the idiosyncrasies we are all tempted to introduce into the Masses we celebrate. The Mass is not my celebration or your celebration, it is the celebration of Christ and his Church.

So, in our communion and in our mission where our dependence is completely on Christ and his Spirit, I want you to know my deepest thanks and appreciation in difficult times, my concern for your spiritual and physical health, and my support in the exercise of Christ's ministerial priesthood where, more than having our feet under our own table, we are being called to be more missionary than residential.

It is a wonderful time to be a priest. I am thrilled that I shall be ordaining the deacons either side of me, David and Kevin, to

the priesthood this summer, and that our four other students in seminary are flourishing. Please pray for them all, and please pray urgently for more vocations to the priesthood and please actively take responsibility for looking for potential vocations.

It is in the context of all that I have been saying that I want to invite all of you, dear Fathers and Brothers, to renew your priestly promises, to be more united with the Lord Jesus and in your priestly ministry always to be prompted by love of him. May Our Blessed Lady intercede for us all that, like her Son, we may be holy priests, good shepherds and faithful teachers and servants of all.

Finally, to you all, priests, deacons and Christ's faithful people, joy and peace in the Lord. Amen.

+Peter

Bishop of Northampton