

Bishop's Homily
CHRISM MASS
April 6, 2009

The *Ceremonial of Bishops* refers to this unique and singular celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy as one where “Presbyters (*that is, priests*) are brought together and concelebrate this Mass as witnesses and cooperators with their bishop in the consecration of the Chrism because they share in the sacred office of the Bishop in building up, sanctifying, and ruling the people of God.”

Gathered together with our Priests are the Deacons, the Consecrated Religious, and the Faithful. As the Church of Altoona-Johnstown, we come together from the slopes and valleys of our Allegheny Mountains to recall our unity as the one Diocesan Church.

The Oils that will be blessed today, -but, particularly the Chrism that will be consecrated, - and then carried out by the representatives of our various faith communities, to be taken to their respective parishes and presented to their Pastor at the Holy Thursday Memorial Mass of the Lord's Supper, - symbolize that unity. And, as many times as these Sacred Oils will be used, in whatever parish they are used, and at whatever time of the year they will be used, - whether at the time of Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination, or grave bodily illness, - those employing them will be celebrating the unity of our Diocesan Church.

In this Jubilee Year of Saint Paul, as proclaimed by our Holy Father, we can turn to the Apostle's wisdom and confirmation of what I have just said. In his letter to the Christians at Corinth, the Diocesan Church that he himself had established there, a Church that was having its own difficulties with factionalism (*that is, disunity*), Saint Paul reminded that, “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” 1 Cor. 10:17. He was, of course, referring to the fact that those who partake of Holy Communion at Mass should be of one mind and act as the one Body of Christ.

Speaking about Saint Paul and the Church at one of his General Audiences some time back, Pope Benedict XVI warned us against the same danger that confronted the Church at Corinth, “It is important, however,” he said, “that all the charisms (*that is, of the Clergy and the Faithful in the Church*) cooperate with one another for the edification of the community and do not instead become the cause of a rift.”

I bring this matter of unity in the Church for our reflection not because it is greatly needed in our own Diocesan Church at this time. Rather, I do so in order for us not to fall prey to so many forces that attempt to misdirect our priorities and even camouflage the real purpose for our existence and status as children and ministers of the One God and members of the one Assembly of Believers that we call the Church. We are called not only to live authentically, strengthened by the Sacred Oils that we bless today, but also to live lives of witness to the reality of the Church being the one Body of Christ.

As we began this Liturgy, we prayed to our Father in Heaven, “Help us to be faithful witnesses in the world to the salvation Christ won for all mankind.”

Our salvation and that of those over whom we have responsibility is to be the overall motivation of our words and actions. It is to be our focus. It is to be our primary criteria. And, it is to be our goal.

The forces that compete for our loyalty are subtle, - worthy values, as they appear to be in themselves. Yet (to use the phrase used by our Holy Father), they can cause a rift (a division) in the Lord's Community; - perhaps, intended all along by Satan, who is skilled at such manipulation.

To name only a few of such forces: - one's own convenience and preference over the common good, - faithfulness to this or that political party (right or wrong), - adherence to a particular church building rather than to the Faith that is celebrated there, - promotion of one's own opinion regarding a matter over the teachings of the Lord and his Church, - the rejection of the Pope's and the Bishop's authority in order to participate in the form of Mass of one's own choosing, and - forgetting that we are here to serve the Lord and not ourselves.

I am sure that we could go on with the list. But, I will not. You get the point.

There are challenging days ahead for the Church in our nation and, therefore, in our Diocesan Church. They are challenges to the sanctity of life, as well as to our being free to adhere to the teachings of our Faith within the workplace, without fear of legal recrimination. Christian unity, as the Lord intended for his followers, or (at least) Catholic Christian unity, would go a long way in successfully confronting those challenges.

As Aesop, the Greek slave and fable writer before the time of Christ, wrote, - a phrase since used by many since, including Patrick Henry of our own national history, - "United we stand, divided we fall." But, we Catholic Christians should not need Aesop.

The current economic situation that is affecting so many of our Faithful presents us with an even greater challenge. It can be another and effective distraction to our understanding ourselves as a united people of the Lord. But, we should not forget that God was with the Israelites even in their plight as they wandered in the desert, - or the persecution of the early Christians whose faithfulness caused the Church to grow rather than diminish, and - even the dedication of our Founding Fathers to establish a "nation under God" that (after a number of serious threats) still exists today and often finds itself wandering in its own kind of desert.

Of course, we find a prime example in the Servant of God Demetrius A. Gallitzin, whose heirs we are. He put the salvation of those whom he was sent to serve above everything else. He gave up prestige, wealth, family, comfort, and personal welfare to do so. And, he was not afraid to write in defense of the one Faith that was his priority above all else, including his own welfare.

The Priests of our Diocesan Church share the responsibility of leadership among this Assembly of Believers with me. They, along with me, are the signs of our unity. Therefore, I look to them to be authentic in and faithful to their calling as the anointed ones of the Lord among you. That is why they are asked at this time to renew their commitment to priestly service.

Because of them and because of you, we are the Diocesan Church that has endured and faithfully witnessed to our unity in the Lord, - despite the challenges that we have had to face and continue to encounter. In that, we are nothing but what we have been called to be: - the one Assembly of Believers.

And, in that, I praise the Lord!