

**Bishop's Homily**  
**CHRISM MASS**  
**March 29, 2010**

This being the “Year of the Priest,” I intended to write our priests a pastoral letter. Many diocesan bishops have the custom, - as do the popes, - to write lengthy, book-length letters on any given subject affecting the Church. I have resisted doing that, - preferring to write a one or two page letter that would be read, - or, maybe, not, - rather than a pamphlet that ends up on a bookshelf, - or, even elsewhere.

So, it looks like I will not be writing that pastoral letter. But, - if I had, - my intention was to remind us priests of who we are. I wish to issue that challenge to you today, - my brothers in the priesthood, - “Remember who you are.”

I began last year’s Chrism Mass homily with a quote from the *Ceremonial of Bishops*, where it 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.”

Priests share in the sacred office of the Bishop in building up, sanctifying, and ruling the people of God. That is an awesome responsibility that you brother priests and I have together, - as entrusted to us by the Lord Jesus the Christ himself, - as confirmed by his Church at our ordination.

We would do well to remember the exhortation given by the bishop at that time. To deacons at the time of the “Handing On of the Book of Gospels,” he says, “Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.” (We continue to be in diaconal service even as priests.) And, of course, equally as important, the words of the bishop at the handing of the chalice, paten, and elements to the newly-ordained priest, “Receive the oblation of the holy people to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”

We need to remain keenly aware of who we are as priests, at all times, - whether convenient or inconvenient.

When socializing, recreating, or even at times when we are about tasks that do not appear to be priestly in the strict sense, - it is easy to fall into a sense of being just another member of the human race. Certainly, we are that. However, we are and are seen as being a priest of God. Consequently, anything that we do or say is done by a priest of God and not by just another human being. We are held to a higher standard, - as we should be.

In recent years, priests have been severely challenged in terms of who we ought to be perceived as being. Our identity has been put into question. Even during this Holy Week, that challenge continues across Europe and touches, even, our Holy Father. We continue to be held to

a higher standard because we have been called to be champions of that higher standard. It is to that, - that we have been ordained priests of God. And, we do not have the luxury of “taking off the Lord Jesus Christ.”

But, in the case of this Diocesan Church, our challenges as priests have included the merging and closing of parishes in order to provide more efficient and effective pastoral care to the Faithful. That, certainly, has not been an easy or desirable task. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient understanding, - among some, - of what it is that the Church is; - has brought about public criticism that has been hurtful to our priests and divisive of our Diocesan Church. For many, it appears that Church is merely another human organization rather than the Lord’s Community of Believers. That affects our priests in their humanness as well as in their priesthood. They have borne the heat of the day in their faithfulness to who they are in these situations.

Health is another challenge to the members of our Presbyterate. Several, who would have the right to retire for medical reasons continue to serve the Faithful of our Diocesan Church, even in a limited fashion. I trust that you, the Faithful, appreciate their doing so. I do.

We have a wonderful 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, even when it affected his own welfare.

This morning, we gather together, - Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and the Faithful, as the Church of Altoona-Johnstown, - along with its Diocesan Bishop. We have come together from the slopes and valleys of our Allegheny Mountains to recall our unity as the one Diocesan Church. (A good visual sign of this are our new concelebration vestments, which we bought in accord with liturgical directives of the Holy See.)

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 by the priests, - and, at times by the deacons, - 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 as well as being channels of the Lord’s grace.

Since my mandatory retirement as your Diocesan Bishop looms on the horizon, - although we do not know the day, - I realize that this may very well be the last time that I celebrate a Chrism Mass. I have been your shepherd longer than any of the previous six bishops of this Diocese in over 100 years. It was not long before I found out that I had not come to impose my vision of the Church but to do what the Lord had for us to do at this time of our history. It is time to pass on the crozier to another with fresh insights, - chosen by the Lord, - to lead you into the next chapter of our salvation. I say “our” because I intend to remain with you and among you, - God be willing.

My brother priests, - and, deacons, - remember your promise of obedience to whoever your next Diocesan Bishop might be.

The Priests of our Diocesan Church have shared the responsibility of leadership among this Assembly of Believers with me. They have been extremely helpful to me, individually and through the various consultative bodies that are a part of our diocesan structure of administration. (They have made me look good.) The priests, along with me, have been the signs of our unity. I have looked to them to be authentic in and faithful to their calling as the anointed ones of the Lord among you. They have been true priests for you, and I am grateful to them, - and, so should you be.

Now, I call upon our priests to renew their commitment to priestly service to you. Because of them and because of your faith in the Lord and in them, we are the Diocesan Church that has endured and faithfully witnessed as a Community of Believers, - despite the challenges that we have had to face. In that, we are nothing but what we have been called to be. That is who we are.

May the Lord be praised!