

Chrism Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
March 31, 2015

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: as I travel throughout the diocese administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, I take time to meet informally with the Confirmation candidates before Mass. At the end of our meeting, I give the students the opportunity to ask me any questions that they might have on their mind.

At one of the recent confirmations, a student asked me what inspired me to become a priest. I responded by talking about the important influence of my parents as well as the example set by other priests whom I had known while growing up. I remember, in particular, one priest who had a major impact on me. His name was Father Stanley Rokicinski, whom we called Father Rocky for short. He was the first priest that I got to know personally and he was a real inspiration for my vocation.

I am sure that each of us who share in this great gift of the ministerial priesthood can point to at least one, if not several priests who were an inspiration to us in our journey toward discovering our vocation. I invite

each of you to think about those priests and what was so inspiring about them. I am willing to bet that one of the qualities that stood out to us was the joy with which they lived out their priesthood. Joy is extremely attractive, and when we see a priest who is joyful, we cannot help but be inspired. And that goes for not just us as priests, but for all of the faithful.

Pope Francis highlighted this important role of priestly joy in his Chrism Mass homily for last year when he said: "Priestly joy is a priceless treasure, not only for the priest himself but for the entire faithful people of God: that faithful people from which he is called to be anointed and which he, in turn, is sent to anoint."¹

The Prophet Isaiah in our first reading tonight speaks of the anointing that would be fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ, as we hear in the Gospel. By our priestly ordination, we share in that anointing which enables us, with Christ, to "to bring glad tidings to the poor...to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18-19). Our anointing equips us to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his Blood" (Revelation 1:5) His victory cannot but leave us with joy, and it is our privilege to share it

joyfully with all of those to whom we have been called to minister through our sacred ordination.

Our gathering together today at this Chrism Mass is an opportunity for us to renew our joy in being priests, anointed to bring this Good News to the people of God. In just a few moments, we will renew the promises that we made on the day of our ordination. I invite each of us to recall the profound joy that we had on that great day when we became priests. Do we stand here in the very same sanctuary today with that same joy? Or, do we feel as though that joy has diminished in some way after years of tireless service? If the latter, we pray for the Holy Spirit to rekindle deep within our hearts that flame of joy that comes from knowing that we are loved by God.

Our Holy Father commented on this in his homily when he said the following about our experience of joy as priests: "It can lie dormant, or be clogged by sin or by life's troubles, yet deep down it remains intact, like the embers of a burnt log beneath the ashes, and it can always be renewed. Paul's exhortation to Timothy remains ever timely: I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands (cf. 2 Tim 1:6)."²

The Holy Father goes on to speak about three areas in which that joy is guarded in our lives as priests so that it does not disappear completely from us. He speaks of the joy being guarded “by three sisters who surround it, tend it and defend it: sister poverty, sister fidelity and sister obedience.” Of particular interest is his treatment of joy being a sister to obedience. In this, he is not just speaking about your obedience to the hierarchy of the Church, which of course has an important role to play in being joyful as a priest, but also about the obedience that we have in being of service to those the faithful entrusted to our care. The Holy Father concludes his reflection on obedience by saying the following: “Wherever God’s people have desires or needs, there is the priest, who knows how to listen (*ob-audire*) and feels a loving mandate from Christ who sends him to relieve that need with mercy or to encourage those good desires with resourceful charity.”³

Therefore, the rekindling of that joy we had on the day of our ordination comes from re-focusing our attention on why we are priests, namely, to imitate Christ who has said: “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Our identity and our mission as priests are directed primarily

toward giving glory to God and working with all that we have for the salvation of souls. When we orient our lives toward these two ends, we find great joy, because then we are living authentically as the priests God has anointed us to be.

As I recalled earlier in this homily, referring to the joyful witness of priests and their impact on our vocation, we recognize that we are now privileged to be in that same position. It is beautiful to think, for example, of how some of our more recently ordained priests are sitting among some of those inspiring examples today, now as brother priests. I am confident that our seminarians who are studying for our diocese are looking across the sanctuary to many of you, seeing priests that are joyful and committed servants of the Lord. How many other young men in your parishes will be inspired to consider the priesthood by the joyful renewal of your priestly ministry today?

But the impact goes far beyond those being called to the priesthood. Our joy as priests has the ability to inspire all of the faithful to consider following the Lord more faithfully as His disciples. And you, the faithful, have an important role to play in supporting the priests and one another through your joyful witness to your state in life.

In his weekly column on May 10, 2012, Archbishop Charles Chaput, Archbishop of Philadelphia, commented on the path to renewal in the Church and how it starts with forming good and holy priests. He continued by saying the following: “Of course, if it stops there – no matter how many good seminarians we attract – we fail. Ultimately, while there’s no Church without the Eucharist, and no Eucharist without the priest, it’s also true that there are no priests without families on fire for Jesus Christ. Families who help their sons to hear God’s call; who affirm and support and encourage the priests who already serve them; who live their lives in a way which proves to our priests that their own sacrifices make a difference.”⁴

This brief summary is one that I believe lies at the heart of where we are being called to go as a diocese. As you know, we are in the early stages of adopting a way of life in our diocese that is focused on stewardship rooted in discipleship. When we faithfully resolve to follow that path of intentional discipleship according to our unique vocation, we provide the necessary foundation for a life of stewardship. This is not something for which the priests alone are responsible, as the archbishop suggests. We all have a role to play, one that is rooted in our common anointing in Baptism

which commits us to working together to be agents of the building up the Kingdom of God.

As we continue our celebration of this Chrism Mass, let us give thanks to God for the gift of His priests who have been called to serve the diocese, particularly through the sacramental ministry that they provide on a daily basis. We are extremely grateful as well for the ministry our many permanent deacons who assist them so faithfully and who are a source of great vitality to this local Church. During this Year of Consecrated Life, we also give thanks to God for the many ways in which consecrated men and women have been instruments of God's many blessings in our diocese.

Finally, we thank God for all of the lay faithful of the diocese, whom we as priests, deacons, and religious have the honor of joyfully serving each day. May we all draw closer to our Lord during this Holy Week, grateful for His total gift of Himself for our salvation. In gratitude for that gift, let us strive to give ourselves more completely to Him and His Church as His disciples who desire to join Him at the end of our pilgrimage of faith in the glory of the Resurrection.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Homily for Chrism Mass*, 17 April 2014.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Archbishop Charles Chaput, Weekly Column on May 10, 2012.