

**Homily for the Chrism Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
March 27, 2018**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for the annual celebration of the Chrism Mass for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. Last year's celebration of the Chrism Mass marked the official opening of our Fourth Diocesan Synod. The various elements of the Diocesan Synod took place over the next several months, culminating in the official closing of the Synod on the Solemnity of Christ the King on Sunday, November 26th. In addition to the clergy and consecrated religious who participated, delegates from each of our 129 parishes in this Diocese voted overwhelmingly to adopt a dozen declarations intended to set the direction and tone for the pastoral ministry of this local Church for at least the next ten years.

First and foremost of these declarations was the adoption of a new mission statement for our diocese "to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and

steadfast stewards of God's creation who seek to become saints," and we expressed our commitment to further this mission by implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation and service.

As we move into the implementation phase of our Fourth Diocesan Synod, I have been writing my biweekly columns in our *Catholic Times* publication about each of the twelve synodal declarations. I am also working on my third pastoral letter, which will be a post-synodal pastoral exhortation. After that is published, I will begin a new round of parish pastoral visits. When I visit our parishes, I will make this simple by asking one basic question: what are you doing to implement the Synod? My hope is that you will have a lot to tell me!

The main focus of this Chrism Mass, of course, is the blessing and consecration of three kinds of oils: the Oil of the Sick, used in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick; the Oil of Catechumens, used to anoint those preparing to be baptized; and the Sacred Chrism, used to consecrate altars and church buildings and to consecrate people in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders.

Just last month, much of the world was transfixed watching the Winter Olympic Games from South Korea. It is from the ancient Olympic Games in classical Greece that we can derive much of the significance of the symbolism and use of olive oil. Why did ancient athletes use oil? Clearly it was viewed as a healthy thing to do. One inscription from the Roman empire makes the point that “the use of oil is very appropriate and very necessary for human bodies and especially so for the bodies of the old.”¹

Stephen Miller in his 2004 book *Ancient Greek Athletics* gives the following answer:

Some suggest that rubbing the oil in helped to warm up and limber the muscles before exercise, others that the oil protected the skin from the sun and the elements. Another theory is that oil produced a glistening body which was aesthetically pleasing and desirable, or that the coating of oil prevented the loss of bodily fluids during exercise...There may also have been a religious dimension: the athlete dedicated himself by the use of oil [which was used, for example, to anoint divine images]...These theories are not mutually exclusive, and we may suspect that the custom was so venerable and ubiquitous among the Greeks that they themselves were uncertain of its full range of significance.²

When the first Olympic Games took place in Olympia in 776 B.C., an olive-tree branch was the award to the winners symbolizing the end of any hostility and a pledge of peace. This symbolic award was given to winners until the end of the ancient Olympic Games. However, an olive-tree branch was not the only award in the games, but the product itself. The quantities of olive oil delivered to the winners were huge. For example, depending on the sport, the first winner could take as award of about five tons!³

The mythic and great poet of Antiquity, Homer, called olive oil a “Golden Liquid,” which constituted then, and still constitutes today, a basic and irreplaceable nutritional component of Greeks, helping to protect health and aiding a person’s longevity. The first and foremost Doctor of Medicine, Hippocrates, used the olive oil to cure hundreds of illnesses, as reported in ancient and modern medical texts.⁴ The symbol of the olive tree has very deep roots in Greek tradition; it symbolizes wealth, health, beauty, wisdom and abundance.⁵

Hence we see the various symbolic meanings employed by the Church when she uses oil to give us spiritual nourishment, to cure our spiritual ailments, to spread the light of grace in our souls, and to render us strong and active in the never-ending conflict with the Spirit of Evil. The

use of oil to express the imparting of spiritual strength is so appropriate that the Church employs it not only for the anointing of people, but also for altars and church buildings which are to be used to assist in the sanctification of the people of God.⁶

The symbolism of oil in the Judeo-Christian tradition can be seen in today's readings from the Sacred Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah refers to the "oil of gladness."⁷ Jesus quotes this passage and says with reference to Himself, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."⁸

As we pray during this most sacred time of the Church's liturgical year, may our commemoration of Christ's passion and death and our celebration of His resurrection help us to grow in holiness, which indeed brings gladness, joy and eternal happiness. May our priests, who concelebrate this Chrism Mass to manifest their communion with me as their bishop, be faithful in carrying out their priestly office and in fulfilling their priestly promises, which they will renew momentarily. May the Holy Spirit guide us to implement the commitment we made at Fourth Diocesan Synod to build a vibrant community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God's creation who seek to become saints. May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Dr. Jason König, citing *I. Magnesia* 116, 9-11, in *Ancient and Modern Olympics: Why Did Ancient Athletes Cover Themselves in Oil?* Posted March 30, 2012 at: <https://ancientandmodernolympics.wordpress.com/2012/03/30/why-did-ancient-athletes-cover-themselves-in-oil/>.

² Stephen Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 15.

³ "Greek Olive Oil and History," www.greek-olive-oil.com/history.html.

⁴ "Ancient Greece and the History of Olive Oil," www.oliorama.gr/node/183.

⁵ "Ancient Greece and Olives," epochproducts.com/blog/ancient-greece-and-olives/.

⁶ The explanation of the Holy Oils presented here is derived from Rev. John F. Sullivan, *The Externals of the Catholic Church* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1918), *Imprimatur* +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York, March 27, 1918; *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, volume IA, Initiation (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 85-87, 160, and 164; and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), *Imprimi potest*, +Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, nos. 695, 1241, 1289, 1294, and 1513; see http://www.awakentoprayer.org/holy_oils.htm.

⁷ Isaiah 61:3.

⁸ Luke 4:21.