Priests as ministers of truth

Chrism Mass 2018

My Brothers, this night is always a special joy for me as I’m sure it is for you as we come together to celebrate this Chrism Mass. Today we had the opportunity to be really blessed by some very rich reflections on our priestly calling by Fr Brian Nichols in our reflection day. So we had that spiritual preparation that I think enriches our evening celebration. This liturgy each year does carry a special importance for us as we reflect upon and renew our priestly vocation.

Just over a week ago, I was in the Philippines to ordain Cristanto Mendoza to the priesthood. He chose as his first reading the first reading we had this evening. The words, “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me for the Lord has anointed me,” are words that I’m sure are very significant to us as priests. This is the reality of being ordained, we have been anointed by the Holy Spirit as priests.

In speaking of anointing, I recall the words of the Lord to his apostles at the Last Supper, using another word, but very close to the word ‘anoint’. He said: “For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.” (Jn 17:19)

Tonight, as we renew our priestly commitment, we renew our priestly identity and mission. We do this in the light of the circumstances of our society, as we heard today. This year I would like to offer some comments on the subject of being “consecrated in truth”.

Partly because this year marks the anniversary of two particular Church documents. It marks the 20th anniversary of St John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio* and also marks the 50th anniversary of Blessed Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*. Both these documents have prophetic relevance for us today. And they both stand as beacons in a culture which is falling into the shadows.

John Paul II’s encyclical says that “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth…” (FR 1) It is a very inspiring image. The human spirit desires to rise to the contemplation of truth. And it has two wings on which to do it: faith and reason. One a supernatural gift, the other a natural gift.

In recent days in the Liturgy, as we read of the disputes between the Lord and the Jewish authorities, the Lord is clearly disturbed by their inability to recognise the truth that stands before them. For the Lord, the recognition of truth is vital for each person to be set free, as he says in John’s Gospel.

In a world which struggles with the idea of faith and at the same time has relativised truth, the Church proclaims that the human person has an aspiration for knowing what is. It declares that the ultimate truth is transcendental in nature. Truth that will reveal the meaning of human life and that truth is ultimately found through faith in God.

As priests, our task, in the midst of a culture enmeshed in the physical, is to proclaim eternal truths. We proclaim in the Creed each Sunday our foundational beliefs. These are not just dry dogmas but are truths of a transcendental order. The Creed is in fact the fruit of the interaction of faith and reason as the Church grappled to understand the central mysteries of the faith. Such truths are the bedrock to our faith.

In an age that has emotivised truth so that we rank feeling above judgement and sincerity above facts, we witness people choosing what they perceive as satisfying them personally over objective truth. More and more people live their lives based on their subjective feelings and desires. It becomes all about the self as the ultimate source of truth.

Far from leading a person to genuine authenticity this radical autonomy readily results in the individual being captured by uncritical groupthink.

In the face of a crisis in truth, we can take heart from this magisterial document which affirms that there is universal truth and it can be found.

The truth is more than just a concept; in the end, truth is in fact a person, Jesus Christ. For the Lord himself proclaimed in St John’s Gospel, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Truth is therefore not *something* but *someone*. This reality is captured by an insight of Pope Benedict XVI, which is also a favourite of Pope Francis, where Pope Benedict says, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (Deus Caritas Est, 1)

It is in relationship with Jesus Christ, and living our lives according to his Way, that human beings will find true freedom.

We priests have in the deposit of faith and in the Catechism of the Church an abiding and sound source of truth. And our task is to faithfully present this truth in its full beauty and profundity with the confidence that it will indeed set people free. (Jn 8:32)

The anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* reminds us of the Church’s consistent teaching concerning the intrinsic relationship between spousal love and the openness to new life. Looking back over the past fifty years we can see how far society has moved from this essential understanding of the meaning of human sexuality. The nature and purpose of human sexuality has been so radically redefined that a current generation of young people would find this teaching simply unfathomable. But, as we know, it is more relevant than ever. For if you intentionally seek to remove the procreative dimension from the unitive dimension of marital love you fundamentally corrupt God’s good plan for human sexuality.

We now live in a world where marriage and sexual relations have been separated from the intrinsic relationship to having children, and children are intentionally conceived outside the marital union.

In this very important issue, the Church remains radically at odds with the prevailing culture. Yet we see even now among our young people there is real reason for hope. Increasingly we are discovering young Catholics coming into contact particularly with the vision of Christian marriage presented by Pope St John Paul II in his series of Wednesday audiences now popularly called the “Theology of the Body”. These reflections on marriage and human sexuality go beyond a ‘moralistic’ approach and properly explain their meaning in the context of God’s creation of the human person. Chastity is revealed not as a negative ‘refraining from’ but a positive ‘living for Christ’. It is being discovered as a positive and beautiful way to prepare for marriage. The truths of the Church are indeed being rediscovered afresh. Because it is simply not just about rules but living the way of Christ, who is the Truth, a luminous truth, a *veritatis splendour*.

As priests, let us not be cowered by the contemporary culture so that we lose confidence in the truth presented by the Church. Our mission is to invite people to discover that our faith in Christ offers a path to freedom and beauty. God’s plan for human life and human sexuality is good. It is the way to human happiness and fulfilment.

My brothers, at this Chrism Mass this year I invite you to embrace once more your priestly calling and in doing so to be strengthened in your resolve to be faithful ministers of the Gospel and teachers of the tradition of the faith.

In the conclusion to his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the Pope urges us “to lead people to discover both their capacity to know the truth and their yearning for the ultimate and definitive meaning of life”. (FR 102) In the end, this is what we are to do: we are to help people discover the truth. The truth who is a person, who is Christ. And in discovering that truth, in discovering Christ, they will find meaning to life.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

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