Humble witnesses to the glory of the priesthood

Chrism Mass 2017

My dear brothers in the priesthood, this Mass each year holds a special place in our hearts. Established around the rites of the Blessing of the Holy Oils for use in our sacramental ministry, it is the Liturgy each year that has its focus on the priestly ministry in the Church.

Each year we renew our priestly vows, expressing our intent to continue to embrace our priestly calling, formally bestowed on us at our Ordination.

The priesthood has its distinctive theology and spirituality. There are titles attributed to priests that capture some of the aspects of this theology and spirituality.

Tonight gathered with your fellow priests of the Archdiocese, conscious of your own ministry and aware of the ministry of your brothers, is there a title or description of your identity that most expresses your self-understanding?

For example, is it the title “Father”, being a spiritual father to the people of God entrusted to you in your parish? Or the designation of being a pastor, a shepherd, aware of the teaching of the Lord about the good shepherd? Is it “priest” with its cultic overtones, being anointed and set apart for sacred ministry? Is it being a servant leader of the people?

Do you connect your priestly identity principally with your sacramental ministry? Or with your pastoral relationships? Or your calling to be preacher and teacher of the Word?

And what virtues do you most see as depicting your ministry? Is it Compassion? Or Service? Or Fidelity? Or Obedience? Or Humility?

I am sure all of the above resonates with you in one way or another. It is possible there are other designations and virtues that capture your self-identity. We know that we have been called into a sacred ministry and are instruments of grace. And we know our own frailty and unworthiness for such a high calling.

The priesthood has a rich and diverse spirituality alongside its theological understanding. Tonight is a night to delve within and touch those elements to our priestly service in the Church. It is an occasion to renew our priestly commitment to those ideals that are most precious to us. It is an occasion to express in prayer our desire to be priests after the heart of God. The words of the first reading, repeated in the Gospel, resonate with us: “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me”. We are men anointed not only with oil but with the Spirit of God.

Our Holy Father, Francis, has revealed his own sense of priestly identity and service. Knowing Pope Francis as we do we know that he will challenge us and make us feel uncomfortable. We know that he has often called us to get our hands dirty, to take on the smell of the sheep, to see the Church more as a field hospital.

For example he has said, “Teachers of the faith need to get out of their cave,” and the clergy “out of the sacristy.”

Not mincing his words, he said on another occasion, “The world is tired of dishonest charmers. And, I dare say, ‘fashionable’ priests and bishops. People sense this, the people of God have this sense and they refuse and distance themselves when they recognize narcissists, manipulators, defenders of their own causes, leaders of pointless crusades.”

However, he has also said, "As we contemplate the wounded heart of the Lord, we see ourselves reflected in him. His heart, and our own, are similar: both are wounded and risen. But we know that his heart was pure love and was wounded because it willed to be so; our heart, on the other hand, was pure wound, which was healed because it allowed itself to be loved." A beautiful and truthful insight.

Pope Francis has often reminded us of our high calling while urging us to be humble of heart. We can identify a number of his key themes.

1. He has often emphasised the need for priests to be close to God. Not an unexpected comment by a pope. You may recall his question to priests, “At night, how does your day end? With God or with television?”
2. He has unrelentingly called priests to be close to the people. He does not want to see us in our presbyteries or parish offices, but out among the people. This is a point for examination of conscience.
3. He has often emphasised that our priestly authority is linked to service, particularly to the poor and the weak. We know that this is a theme very dear to the heart of the Holy Father. He wants to see priests among the poor and vulnerable.
4. The priest, he has said, must be a dispenser of mercy in their sacramental ministry and in their relationships with people. He initiated a Year of Mercy to highlight this theme.
5. He has called priests to have a simplicity of life. He does not like to see priests living it up. Pope Francis wants us to be humble and simple in spirit. We are not to seek honours for ourselves or any way expect privilege.
6. And finally the priest should be a source of blessing for his people. He has said: “a good priest is recognised by the way his people are blessed”. He added that when they leave Mass they should show that they have heard good news. We are to be sources of hope, of encouragement. Our preaching is to be inspiring, lifting up hearts of the people.

Pope Francis encourages us to be priests who live the Gospel imperatives. We are to mirror the example of Christ himself. We are to be witnesses to the Christian life and credible witnesses to the people we serve.

At his first Chrism Mass he prayed for priests in these words,

Dear Priests, may God the Father renew in us the Spirit of holiness with whom we have been anointed. May he renew his spirit in our hearts so that this anointing may spread to everyone, especially to those on the ‘outskirts’ where our lay faithful people most look for it and most appreciate it. May our people sense that we are the Lord’s disciples; and may they receive through our words and deeds the oil of gladness which Jesus, the Anointed One, came to bring us.

He also called upon the lay faithful to pray for their priests – and I encourage those attending this Mass tonight to take his words to heart. He said,

Dear lay faithful, be close to your priests with affection and with your prayers; that they may always be shepherds according to God’s heart. And pray for those whom God is calling to be priests that they may respond to this call with humility and joy.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Thursday, April 6, 2017