

Chrism Mass 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

Dear and beloved brothers in the priesthood

I met with Fr David Standley shortly before his death on 21 March. He'd been a priest of our Archdiocese just shy of fifty-seven years. Although very weak, we were able to speak and pray together. Fr David knew the end of his earthly life was approaching. I thanked him for his ministry and service as a priest. We spoke about the whole point of our existence culminating in meeting the Lord. Fr David captured his life, his priesthood, and his immanent homecoming, in these simple words: 'It's all about God's love.'

As we consecrate the Sacred Chrism, and bless the Oils of Catechumens and of the Sick, the Roman Missal gives a three-fold instruction to the bishop regarding his homily. Unfortunately for you, it says nothing about how short it should be. The bishop is to preach about priestly anointing, to urge the priests to faithfulness in their office, and call them to renew publicly their priestly promises.

There is only one priesthood of Christ, made present in the Church in two distinct and complementary ways. Every baptised disciple shares Christ's priesthood. This 'common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace,' through 'a life of faith, hope and charity,' a life lived according to the Spirit.¹ The ministerial priesthood, received through Sacred Ordination, 'is at the service of this common priesthood.'² Those of us ordained priests are 'a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church.'³ To express this in terms of today's Gospel, we are priests anointed with the Spirit of the Lord. We are sent out to announce Good News. We are commissioned to serve.

My brother priests I want to thank you sincerely for your ministry in our Archdiocese. You don't need me to tell you that being a priest today is challenging, something not to be underestimated or ignored. And yet, more

¹ CCC 1547

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

than any challenge, the priesthood remains an immense and precious gift, entrusted to us, poor though we are. It's not merely worthwhile to be priest, it's an honour and a joy, because the priesthood is all about God's love for us in Christ. How vital it is to remember and encourage each other in this truth: our priesthood is all about God's love. We delight in our unity with Christ and his Church. We delight in seeing our faithful people flourish in their faith. We delight in being present to them as servants about our Master's business.

Recall, for a moment, what it was like to be anointed at your priestly ordination. For some of us this happened recently, for others it was ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or more years ago. Remember how you held out your open hands, ready to receive from the Lord, ready to give yourself in his service. As the Father anointed the Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, you were anointed with Sacred Chrism to be preserved in sanctifying the Christian people and offering sacrifice to God. That purpose remains as true and necessary today.

My brothers, just turn over and open your hands and look at them: older, maybe scarred, perhaps not quite so nimble. The oil is no longer visible, but Christ's anointing is still there. It's seeped into your being as part of your spiritual DNA, and the effect of that anointing continues to preserve you as a priest of Jesus Christ.

Countless times your hands have sanctified and offered sacrifice, reaching out to God's holy people with God's holy gifts. Through your hands so many have been initiated into Christian life, nourished by the Eucharist, absolved, anointed, blessed in marriage, and commended to heaven. How many times have your hands reached out in welcome, embraced in consolation, and steadied in despair.

If we're honest, there will have been times too when we've asked ourselves: 'Were my hands really anointed for this?' as we've unlocked buildings, counted money, stacked chairs, swept floors, and fixed drains. When did any of us last thank God specifically for the anointing of our hands? Today, I thank him. I thank him that your hands, and your entire being, were anointed

for the consecration of God's people. Our anointing - for us and for others - is all about God's love.

My brothers, today I ask you to renew your faithfulness to your priestly vocation. The Lord Jesus calls us to be perfect, holy, and compassionate, just as our Heavenly Father is perfect, holy, and compassionate. This can seem beyond us, and by our own strength it is. We know our weakness only too well. Our renewal of faithfulness to the priesthood is a turning again to God's love. It's an act of trust that God, who has begun the good work in us, continues to bring it to fulfilment.

We may be tempted to ask: what is the test of our priestly faithfulness? Might it be how we bring Good News to the poor; those spiritually poor who do not know the Lord Jesus, and those materially poor who suffer and are in need? Might it be how we proclaim liberty to captives; offering forgiveness to those trapped by sin, and shepherding with hope those imprisoned by the burdens of life? Might it be how we enable people to see and encounter the Lord Jesus and his Gospel as the way of joyful fulfilment? Might it be how our ministry conveys the Lord's favour, mercy, wisdom, and blessing? Perhaps these shoots of the Kingdom, present within and through our priesthood, are the real signs of our faithfulness.

So much is asked of us. We can feel overwhelmed by bureaucracy and administration. We can experience dislocation and isolation. We can only approach the future in our Archdiocese together, as the People of God - bishops, priests, and deacons, consecrated men and women, baptised brothers and sisters. The fundamental question we face is this: how can we be so united in Christ that his love among us is contagious?

My brother priests, I will ask you today to affirm the 'yes,' the 'I am,' you made at your ordination. Think back to that day, to the place and the people. When St Therese of Lisieux described receiving her first Holy Communion she said, *'I knew that I was loved.'* I hope you can say the same about your priestly ordination and your ministry as a priest ever since.

I will ask if you are determined to be more closely united with the Lord Jesus. This can only happen through an intimate relationship with him which is deeply personal. Our inner life with Christ fuels any outer life we might have or desire. With an empty tank we cannot make the journey. Simple friendship with Christ, wanting to know him so as to become more like him, is the bedrock for our sacred duties. We commit again, freely and willingly, to the gift we made of ourselves to Christ and continue to make each day.

Our priesthood is not about our status, or for our benefit, even though it brings immeasurable consolations. We could hear one person's confession, anoint one person who is dying, comfort one person at their lowest ebb, and the whole of our priesthood would be fulfilled. But these graces come to us over and over again. We are custodians of God's mysteries, especially through the Sacraments, with the Eucharist our very lifeblood. We are imperfect shepherds who teach and lead in Christ's name, knowing that our strength and hope comes from him.

A priest friend of mine says jokingly that he wants inscribed on his gravestone 'paralysed by zeal.' The words zeal and zealot often have negative overtones. They're associated with fanatics. There is, however, a zeal that is healthy and holy. Today we're asked whether our primary motivation is zeal for souls. Are we eager, desirous, passionate, and enthusiastic to bring people to Christ? I invite each of you to say 'yes, I am.'

My brothers you are a gift to the Church and the people of our Archdiocese. As priests we are also gifts to each other. Each of you is a gift to me. If you've arrived at this last staging post of Lent feeling like a spiritual failure, join the club. I went to confession on Monday and began saying I've not really had a very successful Lent. The wise confessor said an unsuccessful Lent is not necessarily a bad thing. If we arrive at this point in Holy Week full of our successes, and boasting of our achievements, how could we really know our need of the Lord? The Paschal Mystery of Christ's dying and rising is about what the Lord has done for us, not what we've done for him.

We have been anointed, but we depend on the Lord. We seek to be faithful, but we depend on the Lord. We desire to serve, but we depend on the Lord.

We can only renew our 'yes' to our priestly promises utterly dependent on the Lord; and with the prayers and collaboration of our deacons and our baptised and consecrated sisters and brothers.

Our priesthood is all about God's love. It can only ever be all about God's love, the crucified and risen love of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.