



The Holy See

CHRISM MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Holy Thursday, 1st April 2010*

(Video)

Images of the celebration

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the centre of the Church's worship is the notion of "sacrament". This means that it is not primarily we who act, but God comes first to meet us through his action, he looks upon us and he leads us to himself. Another striking feature is this: God touches us through material things, through gifts of creation that he takes up into his service, making them instruments of the encounter between us and himself. There are four elements in creation on which the world of sacraments is built: water, bread, wine and olive oil. Water, as the basic element and fundamental condition of all life, is the essential sign of the act in which, through baptism, we become Christians and are born to new life. While water is the vital element everywhere, and thus represents the shared access of all people to rebirth as Christians, the other three elements belong to the culture of the Mediterranean region. In other words, they point towards the concrete historical environment in which Christianity emerged. God acted in a clearly defined place on the earth, he truly made history with men. On the one hand, these three elements are gifts of creation, and on the other, they also indicate the locality of the history of God with us. They are a synthesis between creation and history: gifts of God that always connect us to those parts of the world where God chose to act with us in historical time, where he chose to become one of us.

Within these three elements there is a further gradation. Bread has to do with everyday life. It is

the fundamental gift of life day by day. Wine has to do with feasting, with the fine things of creation, in which, at the same time, the joy of the redeemed finds particular expression. Olive oil has a wide range of meaning. It is nourishment, it is medicine, it gives beauty, it prepares us for battle and it gives strength. Kings and priests are anointed with oil, which is thus a sign of dignity and responsibility, and likewise of the strength that comes from God. Even the name that we bear as “Christians” contains the mystery of the oil. The word “Christians”, in fact, by which Christ’s disciples were known in the earliest days of Gentile Christianity, is derived from the word “Christ” (Acts 11:20-21) – the Greek translation of the word “Messiah”, which means “anointed one”. To be a Christian is to come from Christ, to belong to Christ, to the anointed one of God, to whom God granted kingship and priesthood. It means belonging to him whom God himself anointed – not with material oil, but with the One whom the oil represents: with his Holy Spirit. Olive oil is thus in a very particular way a symbol of the total compenetration of the man Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

In the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, the holy oils are at the centre of the liturgical action. They are consecrated in the bishop’s cathedral for the whole year. They thus serve also as an expression of the Church’s unity, guaranteed by the episcopate, and they point to Christ, the true “shepherd and guardian” of our souls, as Saint Peter calls him (1 Pet 2:25). At the same time, they hold together the entire liturgical year, anchored in the mystery of Holy Thursday. Finally, they point to the Garden of Olives, the scene of Jesus’ inner acceptance of his Passion. Yet the Garden of Olives is also the place from which he ascended to the Father, and is therefore the place of redemption: God did not leave Jesus in death. Jesus lives for ever with the Father, and is therefore omnipresent, with us always. This double mystery of the Mount of Olives is also always “at work” within the Church’s sacramental oil. In four sacraments, oil is the sign of God’s goodness reaching out to touch us: in baptism, in confirmation as the sacrament of the Holy Spirit, in the different grades of the sacrament of holy orders and finally in the anointing of the sick, in which oil is offered to us, so to speak, as God’s medicine – as the medicine which now assures us of his goodness, offering us strength and consolation, yet at the same time points beyond the moment of the illness towards the definitive healing, the resurrection (cf. Jas 5:14). Thus oil, in its different forms, accompanies us throughout our lives: beginning with the catechumenate and baptism, and continuing right up to the moment when we prepare to meet God, our Judge and Saviour. Moreover, the Chrism Mass, in which the sacramental sign of oil is presented to us as part of the language of God’s creation, speaks in particular to us who are priests: it speaks of Christ, whom God anointed King and Priest – of him who makes us sharers in his priesthood, in his “anointing”, through our own priestly ordination.

I should like, then, to attempt a brief interpretation of the mystery of this holy sign in its essential reference to the priestly vocation. In popular etymologies a connection was made, even in ancient times, between the Greek word “*elaion*” – oil – and the word “*eleos*” – mercy. In fact, in the various sacraments, consecrated oil is always a sign of God’s mercy. So the meaning of priestly anointing always includes the mission to bring God’s mercy to those we serve. In the lamp of our lives, the oil of mercy should never run dry. Let us always obtain it from the Lord in good time – in our

encounter with his word, in our reception of the sacraments, in the time we spend with him in prayer.

As a consequence of the story of the dove bearing an olive branch to signal the end of the flood – and thus God’s new peace with the world of men – not only the dove but also the olive branch and oil itself have become symbols of peace. The Christians of antiquity loved to decorate the tombs of their dead with the crown of victory and the olive branch, symbol of peace. They knew that Christ conquered death and that their dead were resting in the peace of Christ. They knew that they themselves were awaited by Christ, that he had promised them the peace which the world cannot give. They remembered that the first words of the Risen Lord to his disciples were: “Peace be with you!” (Jn 20:19). He himself, so to speak, bears the olive branch, he introduces his peace into the world. He announces God’s saving goodness. He is our peace. Christians should therefore be people of peace, people who recognize and live the mystery of the Cross as a mystery of reconciliation. Christ does not conquer through the sword, but through the Cross. He wins by conquering hatred. He wins through the force of his greater love. The Cross of Christ expresses his “no” to violence. And in this way, it is God’s victory sign, which announces Jesus’ new way. The one who suffered was stronger than the ones who exercised power. In his self-giving on the Cross, Christ conquered violence. As priests we are called, in fellowship with Jesus Christ, to be men of peace, we are called to oppose violence and to trust in the greater power of love.

A further aspect of the symbolism of oil is that it strengthens for battle. This does not contradict the theme of peace, but forms part of it. The battle of Christians consisted – and still consists – not in the use of violence, but in the fact that they were – and are – ready to suffer for the good, for God. It consists in the fact that Christians, as good citizens, keep the law and do what is just and good. It consists in the fact that they do not do whatever within the legal system in force is not just but unjust. The battle of the martyrs consists in their concrete “no” to injustice: by taking no part in idolatry, in Emperor worship, they refused to bow down before falsehood, before the adoration of human persons and their power. With their “no” to falsehood and all its consequences, they upheld the power of right and truth. Thus they served true peace. Today too it is important for Christians to follow what is right, which is the foundation of peace. Today too it is important for Christians not to accept a wrong that is enshrined in law – for example the killing of innocent unborn children. In this way we serve peace, in this way we find ourselves following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, of whom Saint Peter says: “When he was reviled he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet 2:23f.).

The Fathers of the Church were fascinated by a phrase from *Psalms* 45 (44) – traditionally held to be Solomon’s wedding psalm – which was reinterpreted by Christians as the psalm for the marriage of the new Solomon, Jesus Christ, to his Church. To the King, Christ, it is said: “Your love is for justice; your hatred for evil. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above other kings” (v. 8). What is this oil of gladness with which the true king, Christ,

was anointed? The Fathers had no doubt in this regard: the oil of gladness is the Holy Spirit himself, who was poured out upon Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the gladness that comes from God. From Jesus this gladness sweeps over us in his Gospel, in the joyful message that God knows us, that he is good and that his goodness is the power above all powers; that we are wanted and loved by him. Gladness is the fruit of love. The oil of gladness, which was poured out over Christ and comes to us from him, is the Holy Spirit, the gift of Love who makes us glad to be alive. Since we know Christ, and since in him we know the true God, we know that it is good to be a human being. It is good to be alive, because we are loved, because truth itself is good.

In the early Church, the consecrated oil was considered a special sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, who communicates himself to us as a gift from Christ. He is the oil of gladness. This gladness is different from entertainment and from the outward happiness that modern society seeks for itself. Entertainment, in its proper place, is certainly good and enjoyable. It is good to be able to laugh. But entertainment is not everything. It is only a small part of our lives, and when it tries to be the whole, it becomes a mask behind which despair lurks, or at least doubt over whether life is really good, or whether non-existence might perhaps be better than existence. The gladness that comes to us from Christ is different. It does indeed make us happy, but it can also perfectly well coexist with suffering. It gives us the capacity to suffer and, in suffering, to remain nevertheless profoundly glad. It gives us the capacity to share the suffering of others and thus by placing ourselves at one another's disposal, to express tangibly the light and the goodness of God. I am always struck by the passage in the *Acts of the Apostles* which recounts that after the Apostles had been whipped by order of the Sanhedrin, they "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:41). Anyone who loves is ready to suffer for the beloved and for the sake of his love, and in this way he experiences a deeper joy. The joy of the martyrs was stronger than the torments inflicted on them. This joy was ultimately victorious and opened the gates of history for Christ. As priests, we are – in Saint Paul's words – "co-workers with you for your joy" (2 Cor 1:24). In the fruit of the olive-tree, in the consecrated oil, we are touched by the goodness of the Creator, the love of the Redeemer. Let us pray that his gladness may pervade us ever more deeply and that we may be capable of bringing it anew to a world in such urgent need of the joy that has its source in truth. Amen.

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