

**Homily for the Chrism Mass and Opening of the Fourth Diocesan Synod
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
April 11, 2017**

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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, which this year will also include the official opening of our Fourth Diocesan Synod. The various elements of the Diocesan Synod will take 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. The Diocesan Synod will set the direction and tone for the pastoral ministry of the parishes and other components of the diocese itself for the next several years, if not decades, to come.

One of the original reasons for scheduling the official opening of the Synod in conjunction with the Chrism Mass was that the Chrism Mass is an occasion when most of our priests are present along with representatives of each of the parishes of the diocese. But as I was preparing my homily for this Chrism Mass, it became clear to me in the course of my prayer that

there is an important spiritual connection between the Chrism Mass and the theme of our Synod being focused on promoting discipleship and stewardship. If we consider the symbolism of the oils that are blessed and consecrated at the Chrism Mass, we can gain a greater appreciation for their relationship to the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

At the Chrism Mass in the cathedral of every diocese around the world during Holy Week, the diocesan bishop blesses or consecrates 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.

The symbolism of oil is not as apparent in our modern context in Western culture as it used to be in the past, so some words of explanation may be helpful.¹ In the countries of the Orient and in southern Europe, olive oil has always been a staple of daily life, much more than with Americans. It enters into the preparation of food; it is used as a remedy, internally and externally; in past centuries it was the chief means of furnishing light, being burned in lamps; it was employed in ancient times

by the athletes of the Olympic games, to give flexibility to their muscles. Hence we see the various symbolic meanings employed by the Church when she uses it 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.

The oils blessed or consecrated at the Chrism Mass—the Oil of Catechumens, the Oil of the Sick, and the Sacred Chrism—are each made from oil extracted from olives, but the Sacred Chrism is distinguished from the others by having perfumed balm or sweetly-scented balsam mixed with it.

Catechumens are those who are preparing to be baptized. They are anointed with the Oil of Catechumens to strengthen them against temptation, since catechumens are considered to some extent to be under the power of the Evil One until they have been united to Christ's mystical body, the Church, by Baptism. The anointing with oil symbolizes their

need for God's help and strength so that, undeterred by the bonds of the past and overcoming the opposition of the devil, they will forthrightly take the step of professing their faith and will hold fast to it unfailingly throughout their lives.

Similarly, the Oil of the Sick is used in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to strengthen them against discouragement or despair in the face of illness and to seek divine healing of their infirmities of body, mind and soul. We know a healing always takes place through this sacrament – even if not physically – as the sick grow in greater union with Christ and are helped to unite their sufferings to the Cross for the good of the whole Church.

The Sacred Chrism, a scented ointment, takes its name from the mixing of fragrant material with the oil. As the consecrated oil signifies the fullness of grace, so the perfumed balsam expresses freedom from corruption and the sweet scent of virtue. Anointing with the Sacred Chrism designates the person or object so anointed as being consecrated, that is, set apart for divine purposes. Thus, the surface of a new altar and the walls of a new church building are anointed by the bishop to show that they are to be used exclusively for divine worship. The bishop anoints the palms of the

hands of a newly-ordained priest with the Sacred Chrism to show that he is consecrated to God to celebrate the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, by which the bread and wine are consecrated by the priest to become the Body and Blood of Christ. The Sacred Chrism is poured on the head of a newly-ordained bishop to show the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in abundance, such that the bishop is called to share that Holy Spirit with the flock that he is called to tend. Those who are baptized and confirmed are anointed with the Sacred Chrism to symbolize their reception of the Holy Spirit, setting them apart as God's adopted sons and daughters.

All of these anointings are pertinent to the themes of discipleship and stewardship that we will be discussing during our Diocesan Synod, as we will be praying for God to strengthen us with His Holy Spirit to become more dedicated disciples of our Risen Lord and more steadfast stewards of His creation.

In order 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, I plan to ask the Fourth Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois to discuss how the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese can be committed to the

discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition.

At this point we are still receiving and evaluating feedback that will be used to form proposed declarations to be discussed at the first synod session on May 20th. These proposed declarations will articulate specific steps to be taken as the concrete means to put into practice the discipleship and stewardship way of life. The deanery listening session conducted by video conference on April 2nd gave invaluable feedback. The survey given to open the preliminary phase of the synod asked some very pointed questions about our relationship with Jesus Christ and the feedback shows that we have a desire to be better disciples. One very prominent point of the feedback has been a strong desire for better formation in discipleship through Bible study and learning how to live as Catholic Christians committed to Christ. This feedback will be very helpful in forming proposed declarations for discussion in our synod sessions.

All of the pastors and parochial administrators in consultation with their parish pastoral councils of every parish in our diocese have designated an official parish delegate who will serve as a voting member of the Diocesan Synod. Representatives of the priests, deacons and

consecrated religious will also participate in the discussion and voting on the proposed synodal declarations and statutes. All the Catholic faithful of our diocese will have an opportunity to make their views known about these proposals.

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. 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 through our 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 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.