

THE SPIRIT ANOINTS PRIEST AND PEOPLE

Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday
March 23, 1978

Isaiah 61:1-3a, 6a, 8b-9

Revelation 1:5-8

Luke 4:16-21

.....,¹ you who have come together with your bishop, you are an eloquent sign to the People of God of the merciful presence of the Redeemer in the world.

In today's gospel we find the model homily. After Jesus reads the biblical passage from the prophet Isaiah, he says: *Today, this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing* (a). This is the role of the homily: to proclaim that the Word of God that is read in the assembly is not simply the telling of the story of some past event but rather that this Word of God is being fulfilled now, in our midst. It is always this way: wherever the Mass is celebrated and wherever the Word of God is proclaimed by a priest or a lay Christian, that Word is being fulfilled there, at that precise moment --- that Word is illuminating the reality of the people in that particular situation. This is precisely what is taking place here on this morning of Holy Thursday. Today, these realities are being fulfilled in our midst. What realities are being fulfilled? The marvelous reality that the Spirit of God has anointed humanity with his own dignity and thus enables all people to participate in the divine life of God. During this Chrism Mass, during this Holy Chrism Mass, we render homage to the Holy Spirit who anoints the priests with his divine power so that they can become ministers of God's mercy and he anoints the People of God with the priestly character that we have all received at the time of our baptism.

What is anointing. Anointing means sharing in the divine powers and sharing in the divine dignity. Therefore, only the Spirit of God can anoint. During this Mass we are going to bless and consecrate these sacred oils that are a sign of the world's anointing by the Holy Spirit, a sign of humanity's anointing by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, our celebration this morning reminds us of and makes present to us three distinct anointings: (1) the personal anointing of Christ, (2) the anointing of the priests, (3) the anointing of the People of God.

The personal anointing of Christ

In the first place, Christ is the anointed One. In other words, Christ is now the anointed One and the anointed One *par excellence*. While the sacred oils must be poured on our heads in order to be anointed, yet it was not necessary for Christ to receive a sacrament because his humanity was anointed from the very beginning of his existence. Jesus' anointing consists in the fact that, as announced to Mary, Jesus was formed, body and soul, in the womb of Mary. (b) The Holy Spirit forms this man Jesus who assumes the divine life in such a way that the whole being of Jesus is the being of God. He speaks the language of a man of this world but his words directly transmit the message of God. He suffers the torments of his passion but it is not simply a man who is suffering this passion. Rather the one who is suffering the pain and torment possesses the dignity of God. Therefore the passion of Jesus has a redemptive

power because this human being, Jesus, who was anointed in the womb of his most holy mother with the power and the virtue of the Holy Spirit, willingly embraces this passion.

Christ, then, is the fullness and source of divine anointing. God wanted to communicate his life to humanity and began by making God a man and this man is also God, is Jesus, the child-God, the young man-God, the mature man-God. Jesus is God and man. This is the essence of our Lord Jesus' anointing. What a beautiful way to begin the Triduum! At this time when in the depth of our being we reflect on the passion and resurrection of this man who redeemed the world and restored life to humankind, life that had been lost by them as a result of sin, we begin the Triduum with this Chrism Mass. It can be said that this morning is a feast in which we honor the Holy Spirit who anointed Christ and so we come here to say: *Thank you, divine Spirit, you who had the power to form in the Virgin's womb a person capable of being anointed with the life of God.*

The anointing of the priests

This life of God that Jesus receives at the beginning of his life, this fullness of grace, this source of grace is also bestowed on every person who comes to a belief in Christ. We call this the anointing of Christianity. In order to make this anointing effective and in order to bestow this anointing on the whole world and on all people, Jesus needed an instrument, a channel that would enable this to happen. Thus, we have the priests.

In every diocese the bishop is surrounded by these necessary collaborators, our priests. Thus the bishop and the priests are God's instruments who are able to bring God's life to the people. They bring the pardon of God to the people who sin. In the sacred host they bring God's nourishment to the people who need to be fed. They bring the forgiveness of God to the child born with original sin. The bishop gifts those who come before him for confirmation with the power of the Holy Spirit. When a man and woman desire to make their love for one another a sign of God's love, there is the priest who gives a divine and sacred meaning to the bond of matrimonial love. When the final hour arrives and a person prepares to travel from this earth to eternity, there is the instrument of God's mercy, the priest administering Viaticum, the final absolution, the anointing of the sick --- there the Spirit of God anoints the body of the infirm so that they, like the crucified Christ, might be able to redeem the world through their suffering and illness, and might have the strength to undertake this journey into eternity.

My sisters and brothers, this morning when we think of the Holy Spirit anointing the priest, let us also be mindful of the great respect that they deserve. Unfortunately, as our Great Benefactor, Jesus, was crucified, so too our priests are held in contempt. Yet even though they are misunderstood, they preach the message of salvation --- a message that is distorted by others because this message of salvation will always disturb the world. Our priests share their lives with the poor, the wretched, the *campesinos*, and like Jesus, the Lord, they proclaim freedom to the poor, the oppressed, prisoners and to all those who suffer. These priests are Christ in our midst. The Council states that Christ is also present in the person of the bishop whom the priests are called to assist. (c) It is Christ who is present in the bishop who teaches and sanctifies and governs and leads the people to God.

This morning when we celebrate our priesthood, I want to take this opportunity to say to my beloved priests who are present here in this celebration and those who have been unable to come here because they are ministering in distant towns and villages --- I want to say to

you, my brother priests: a thousand thanks to you, my beloved priests, may God reward you for having been faithful to your vocation! I give thanks to you because you live your lives in union with the bishop who, though the most unworthy of all priests, is a sign of this priestly unity and at the same time responsible for the spiritual life of the Diocese. Therefore, it is necessary that the priest live in union with the bishop. The ministry of a priest can never be understood apart from this union with the bishop. The words that the priest proclaims in the parish church will not be understood if his teaching is not in accord with the teaching and preaching of the bishop. It is difficult to imagine a priest administering the sacraments if he is not in a relationship with the one who, in the Diocese, is the well-spring of life and grace, a sign of the One who is the ultimate well-spring of life and grace. Therefore, once again, thank you, my beloved priests, for almost all the priests give this witness of unity with the bishop.

If in some way I have offended one of you, my priests, and if because of this we are not in communion with another, then this morning, when Jesus invites us to live this unity as priests so that we might become a sign of his presence and grace and life to the People of God, I ask for your forgiveness. I want to tell you that the bishop desires to be united with his priests and nothing causes him greater affliction than separation, discord and a lack of unity with his priests. The People of God demand that we live in this unity because it is they who suffer when this unity does not exist. At the same time, it is the people who become the beneficiaries when we live enthusiastic, spiritual lives and remain united with one another, bishop with priests and priests with bishop, when we remain united with Christ, our Lord, who is the source of the grace that we share with the people. Therefore, my brother priests, this morning we see our priestly responsibility and our primary objective symbolized in the sacred oils that you will bring forward to be blessed and consecrated. These oils are symbols of our priestly ordination which we remember on this Holy Thursday. May the grace of the sacrament continue to be a source of life for the People of God.

My beloved brother priests, how beautiful it is to remember that unforgettable morning when our extended hands were anointed by the bishop with the same oil of chrism that we are now going to consecrate! I, as bishop, remember that day very well. This occurred on the 21st of June 1970 in the stadium of the Marist Brothers, before many people who saw the anointing of the bishop as a catechetical moment. The sacred chrism that I am now going to consecrate was poured over my head, made me pastor, at that time a collaborator of our venerated elder, Bishop Chávez y González, whom I now have the unmerited honor of succeeding. I am sure that you, my beloved priests, are also able to remember that unforgettable morning. How beautiful was that moment for you, the faithful People of God, the family members of these priests, the towns and villages that are being cared for with so much love and wisdom by these ministers of the People of God! Let us give thanks to the Lord for having chosen these men, given them life in their mother's womb and called them to their priestly vocation.

This morning we are going to renew our priestly commitment and we ask you, the People of God, to pray for us so that we might be worthy of this anointing of the Holy Spirit. The priestly character leaves an indelible mark on the soul of the priests and the Holy Spirit signs them as priests forever. When we do not appreciate our priests, we offend the Holy Spirit. When we listen to the priest, as you are listening to me here this morning, we honor the Holy Spirit. Yet when we speak as priests, we do not speak our own words but as Jesus said this morning in the gospel: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor* (d). In his priests, Jesus continues to proclaim the same words:

this priest is an instrument of the Spirit of God. I thank you, my sisters and brothers, for your many prayers and for your expressions of solidarity with the teaching of the bishop during this past year --- a difficult year but also a year a great consolation, for though your unity, collaboration and fidelity to the priests who are trying to be servants of God, servants of the Word and servants of the Spirit of God, we have seen the Word of God flourish in our midst. You, my sisters and brothers, you, the People of God, are also called to be a priestly people.

The Spirit of God anoints all the People of God

My third thought: the anointing that we celebrate this morning is not only a commemoration of the personal anointing of Christ in his human nature that became so intimately united with the nature of God, not only a commemoration of the anointing of the priests on the day of their ordination --- no, for all of this was done in service of you, my sisters and brothers. For as Jesus said: *The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (e). Each one of us as priests knows that we have not been ordained for ourselves but for you. If we have to care for some personal matter, it does not come from our priestly ordination but rather from our baptism, which makes us one with you.

This morning here in the cathedral of El Salvador, I repeat the words of the famous bishop, Saint Augustine: *with you I am a Christian and for you I am a bishop.*² *Christian* is a name that fills me with hope and makes me await my redemption and salvation. *Bishop* is a responsibility that makes me tremble and at the same time trust in the power of God who has given me this responsibility.

Each priest can say the same thing: *for you I am a priest but with you I am a Christian.* Before we were priests, we were first Christians and Christians with you. We believe in the same truths; we have the same hope and we try to love one another. With you, we try to be signs of the Christian faith that we profess. Before we were priests or bishop, we were Christians. We are the People of God. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, let us mutually understand one another in this sublime ministry of priesthood. You, as a priestly people, may you come to understand your greatness. May you realize that you were anointed by the Holy Spirit. Our priests are instruments of God not only when they poured the water over our heads and cleansed us of original sin at the time of our baptism, but also instruments of God when they anointed us with the chrism that we are now going to consecrate. When the head of the child is anointed at baptism with the chrism oil, that child participates in the life of Christ: priest, prophet and king.

Therefore all of you --- religious brothers, women religious, lay men and women --- who have received the sacrament of baptism bear the seal of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, a character that sets you apart as Christians, as the People of God, as a people anointed to be a priestly people, a prophetic people and a people that ought to make Jesus and the divine principles of God rule the earth. This priestly people are involved in so many different occupations in the world. Look at the distinct occupations that are present here, sharing in this reflection: professionals, professors, workers, *campesinos*, merchants in the market, housewives, cooks, etc. Yet all of you are this People of God that is called to sanctify all the ends of the earth. Your holiness in your profession ---- whatever that might be --- your holiness sanctifies the world.

This morning, my sisters and brothers, Christ who is going to die for us asks for the collaboration of our personal holiness. Christ's redemption saved us from original sin and incorporated us into his mystical body so that we might prolong Christ's presence in the world and in history. Through baptism, Christ made us members of his body and he is asking us, my sisters and brothers, to understand our dignity and responsibility to make our life a true sacrament of God's mercy, grace, truth, and justice. Through baptism, Christ has formed us as a prophetic people, a people who proclaim the wonderful works of God and denounce the evils of humankind. Through baptism, Christ asks us to be a people that are united in the holiness of our doctrine, a people that raises our voice to defend the commands of God when people trample upon the dignity of the human person and when people abuse their power and their wealth. Through baptism, Christ asks us to be a people that proclaim the justice of the Lord, thus being a prophetic people. For this reason it is difficult to understand how a Christian can be a coward, much less a traitor like Judas. As a people anointed by the Holy Spirit, we all have this responsibility.

My dear sisters and brothers, we are going to consecrate these three oils that will be brought to the altar. This triple consecration is, first of all, a symbol of Christ's anointing as the Eternal Priest, the unique prophet, and the universal King. Secondly, through Christ's anointing, these beloved priests and I, your unworthy servant, receive our dignity as priest, prophet and king, and our responsibility to lead and guide the People of God. Thirdly, all of us have been anointed as the People of God so that as a people we might celebrate the wonderful deeds of our redemption during this Holy Week. We celebrate our redemption not as some reality that is outside of us, but as a reality that, because of our anointing, identifies us with Christ. We are Christ's collaborators as he carries his cross to Calvary for we are the people who suffer, the people who die on the cross and the people who are tortured. But three days after this suffering, Christ rose from the dead and was filled with hope. You, the people of El Salvador who through baptism were formed into the People of God, honor this anointing that that we are now going to celebrate so that together with the priestly people we can give thanks to the Lord.

¹ The greeting not fully registered in the recording of the homily.

² St Augustine, *Sermons*, 340, 1: PL 38, 1483.

Margin References (a) Lk 4,21: (b) Lk 1,35: (c) LG 21: (d) Lk 4,18: (e) Mt 20,28.