

Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2007

We often call today's celebration the "Chrism Mass", but it is much more aptly named the "Mass of the Oils", because, not only do we consecrate the Oil of Chrism during it, but also we bless the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick. But the most important word in the title is the word "Mass." More than anything else, it is the Mass which, as I have often written, "establishes us as the gathered community of the disciples of Christ." In the Eucharist, we are both called, and empowered, to share Christ's life and his work of transforming and saving the world. The Mass is central to everything we do which is why we consecrate and bless the sacred oils during this Mass. They are to be the sacramental means by which we experience God's healing and transforming love during the coming year.

I don't think I ever attended this Mass as a lay person but if I had, I think that I could not have failed to have been struck, as perhaps some of you are, by the serried ranks of priests and deacons gathered around the altar. Though impressive to some, others might be tempted to think of this as a display of "them" and "us".

Today we have a much greater sense of what links and makes us one. In the Mass, it is, of course, Christ, through lectern and altar. We are not divided, but united by Word and Sacrament. There's no "them" and "us"; we stand together before the Word, both spoken and made flesh. Gathered with the Lord, who nourishes us and strengthens us, we become that distinctive people of which Isaiah writes in the first reading. "Priests of the Lord...ministers of our God...famous throughout the nations...a race whom the Lord has blessed." This is the setting which makes this Mass such a significant gathering of the community of the Lord's disciples.

My own Eucharistic life has changed over the last two years. I used to celebrate with the Holy Souls Sisters, but now, when I have no commitments to Mass elsewhere, I say Mass here in the Cathedral. A small community gathers here at 7.30 each morning and it has become a very special experience for me. It has helped me to appreciate more and more how much I need the Eucharist as "daily bread" and as the "esca viatorum" – the "bread of travellers." These relatively simple and intimate surroundings enable me increasingly to be immersed into the depths and beauty of the words and action of the liturgy. Here, as Pope Benedict writes, is found the *veritatis splendor*.

I am beginning to realise more deeply that there are all sorts of "consecrations" taking place in the Mass, at the same time as the consecration of the bread and wine. For example, we consecrate our lives through the Word and our response to it; we are consecrated in a wondrous way by that most intimate of encounters with the Lord in Holy Communion. But there's something else too. We don't just bring bread and wine to be offered, we bring ourselves – we are also the gifts. These simple words from the Third Eucharistic Prayer say it all: "Father, we bring you these gifts" – and that's you and me – "so that they (we) may become the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Becoming the body and blood of the Lord means being anointed by the Spirit. We gather together to experience this and, as we do so, clergy and people together, we are consecrated and empowered as the Body of Christ, both for communion with the Lord and with each other, and for the proclamation of the Good News. The *Ite, missa est* is not just a perfunctory dismissal but a significant word, helping us to grasp more deeply the relationship between every Mass we celebrate and our mission to the world. Mass can never be simply a narrowly personal devotion. There can be no such thing as *my* Mass.

Whilst we hold all these thoughts in mind, the focus of today's celebration is particularly on our priests and deacons and their ministry. It is important and necessary that it should be so. Our priests and deacons are the