

CHRISM MASS

Recently in a TV interview, I was asked whether I thought Pope Francis would be able to solve the crisis in the Catholic Church. NO! I said HE WON'T. He can't. The Church has been in crisis ever since it was in the boat with Christ on the Sea of Galilee. AND D'YOU KNOW WHY IT'S IN CRISIS? I asked the interviewer, who reeled back. --Because it is made up of people like you and me, ordinary folk, sinners on the way. The Church will only be perfect when holy and converted, we are united forever with Jesus in Paradise. Let me come back to this in a moment.

For this Chrism Mass has a double focus. First, we consecrate the Holy Chrism for the Sacraments of Confirmation and Ordination; we also bless the Oil of the Catechumens, used to strengthen those preparing for baptism and the Oil of the Sick that brings healing in the Sacrament of Anointing. These holy oils, flowing from the Body of Christ on the Cross, are channels of grace and eternal life, gateways to heaven, the sacred means by which the Holy Spirit, poured out afresh, heals, animates and strengthens God's people, for service and mission, bringing new life and energy across the diocese. This is why we should pray today, first of all, for those to be baptised and confirmed, for Ben Theobald soon to be ordained priest, for the dying and for all who are sick and for those who care for them.

But secondly, the prayers and readings of this Chrism Mass invite us to thank God for the gift of the priesthood instituted on Holy Thursday. In the 1stR, Isaiah prophesied YOU WILL BE NAMED PRIESTS OF THE LORD, MINISTERS OF OUR GOD. By baptism, every disciple shares in Christ's threefold mission as priest, teacher and shepherd, able to act in persona Christi in the person of Christ. Yet the Lord wanted his Church to be a hierarchical communion, in which, by the Sacrament of Order, some are set apart to act in persona Christi capitis, in the Person of Christ the Head, sharing directly in his authority to sanctify, teach and govern. This specifically is what we celebrate today. And in the six months I've been your Bishop, I've been out visiting our priests. I know you will agree with me: our diocese has some fantastic priests! We are deeply grateful to them for their prayer, hard work and fidelity, often in difficult circumstances, and in this Mass, we pray for them.

I might add that I've now begun visiting our deacons and religious, and after the summer, I'll start visiting you, the people of our parishes and schools. JESUS CHRIST IS THE FAITHFUL WITNESS, the 2ndR said. HE LOVES US AND HAS MADE US A LINE OF KINGS, PRIESTS TO SERVE OUR GOD. My first impressions of our diocese with its wide geographical spread from Oxford to the Channel Isles, is that the Church here is full of life and potential. We have so much to thank God for. True, we are presently undertaking a painful process of transition, but as the new framework is rolled out over the next few months, I'll be writing to everyone, lay and ordained, single and married, men and women, to get involved, to take responsibility for the Church's mission. So in this Chrism Mass, let us also pray for our diocese: that the Lord will bless us, grant us vocations, and deepen our desire to witness to the Gospel.

THE LORD HAS ANOINTED ME. HE HAS SENT ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. We celebrate this Chrism Mass in Holy Week at the start of a new era with a new Pope. As the Church sails out into the deep waters of 21C and 22C, a new evangelistic Catholicism is emerging, yes more modest yet more focused on the core Message: the personal-passionate love and discipleship of Jesus Christ, died and risen. The secular media find this fascinating, which is why, with their eyes ever upon us, we need not big numbers but a unique quality. We need authenticity. We need to be like Jesus. We need to be what we are meant to be. Pope Francis is calling us to evangelical simplicity and poverty – and by implication, to take the side of the poor and to struggle for justice and liberation - a thrilling, radical yet profoundly challenging call that illuminates the dark recesses of our own hearts with their materialism and bourgeois quest for comfort. Being Catholic today is about conversion, about becoming holy, about embracing a simpler life-style in order to find union with Jesus, who is the Way to TGLHH&F. This is the core of new evangelisation, an evangelisation new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression. Each one of us, priests and people, needs to become more Christ-like if we are to be effective missionaries in the new cultural context. Indeed, this is the only way towards solving the Church's crisis.

THIS TEXT IS BEING FULFILLED TODAY EVEN AS YOU LISTEN. In other words, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit is even now being poured into our hearts. In this Mass, as we gather, clergy and faithful of the Diocese of Portsmouth, with your new bishop, let us turn to Jesus, whose Heart is the Fount of life and holiness. Let us ask him in this Year of Faith, through the intercession of Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund, for the grace to be more perfectly what we profess.