

CHRISM MASS
“Communio” – the Basis of our Strategic Plan

March 23, 2010
Cathedral of Saint Paul

by The Most Reverend John C. Nienstedt

“Day by day, day by day
O dear Lord, three things I pray:
To see Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly
day by day.”

Tonight, my dear brothers and sisters, we gather together as this local Church of St. Paul and Minneapolis for our annual consecration of the sacred chrism and the blessing of the holy oils of catechumens and of the sick. These oils will be used throughout this next year to anoint the newly baptized, to seal neophytes with the fullness of the Holy Spirit’s gifts, to consecrate new altars for the sacrifice of the Sacred Liturgy, to bring healing to the sick, and to prepare the dying for eternal life. What is more, the sacred chrism will be used, God willing, to anoint the hands of our seven transitional deacons (all of whom are here tonight), as they are ordained to be priests forever. Truly, these holy oils reflect and, indeed, effect the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit in this local Church, the Spirit who is always moving us to ever greater completion of that mission given to Jesus by his heavenly Father.

On such an occasion as this, it is appropriate for us to reflect on the mystery of the Blessed Trinity as pointed to in the words I just sang from St. Richard’s Prayer:

To see more clearly, we must direct our concentrated attention to the Father’s love.

To love more dearly, we must adhere more closely to the self-giving deeds that Jesus performed.

To follow more nearly, we must abandon our wills and, therefore, our desires to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Modeling our spiritual lives, then, on the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, provides the motivation for our three-fold Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and charitable works or service.

This three-fold challenge is referred to in today’s Gospel passage from Saint Luke in which we find Jesus in a house of prayer, reflecting on his mission in light of a Scriptural passage from Isaiah. The ascetical response of Jesus, namely, his total gift of self, is found in his identification with the anointed one on whom the Spirit of the Lord has descended. But that identity is directed to the mission of service that the Father has commanded and the Spirit has directed, namely:

to bring good tidings to the poor,
 to proclaim liberty to captives,
 to restore sight to the blind,
 release to prisoners, and
 to announce a year of the Lords' favor.

There is, therefore, a three-fold aspect to the mission of Christ, a mission that is seen in the life of prayer, asceticism and the charitable works of Jesus. This three-fold reality points to what theologians term a communio or communio between the three divine Persons. This term "communion" derives from the words "cum munus" which translates as a common duty, a common task or common undertaking. What is implied in the term "communion", therefore, is more than the sense of mere community, which involves physical proximity and even common interests or concerns. Rather, "communion" reflects a deeper and more intimate commitment of life, love and truth, as can be perceived in the mystery of the triune God. You can have community without communion, but you could never have communion without community.

This notion of "communion", or in Greek "koinonia", has been identified by the late, beloved Pope John Paul II as the central teaching of the Dogmatic Constitution, Lumen Gentium, of the Second Vatican Council. It has been said that "the concept of communion lies 'at the heart' of the church's self-understanding."

As you may know, the first conciliar draft on the Church submitted for discussion at the opening session of the Council was rejected by the bishops precisely because it posited an overly juridical vision of the Church, a vision which gave too much priority to its organizational structure. In the redrafted document that was ultimately approved overwhelmingly by the Council's third session, the first chapter was entitled, "Church as Mystery," wherein that mystery is described not so much as an organization with rules and regulations, but as a "communion of faith, hope and love," called into being by the Trinitarian God. The emphasis on mystery moves us from thinking more about the external reality of an institution in order to allow our first and predominate focus to fall on the Church's internal reality of grace. Mystery bespeaks a two-fold communion: a vertical communion between the Triune God and believers and a horizontal communion between believers.

Naturally where the vertical and horizontal lines intersect we recognize the cross and on that cross we find the central figure of our Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus, whom the author of Revelation tells us in tonight's second reading is "the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth."

Professor Michael Lawler and Fr. Thomas Shanahan, commenting on the centrality of Christ in the document, Lumen Gentium, point out:

"The Church exists only since Christ, only in Christ through his Spirit, only by Christ, and only for Christ and the God he reveals. If it is ever separated from Christ, absolutized in itself, considered only in its institutional aspects, it ceases to be a Christian Church and becomes just one more human institution among many in the world. The Church is not only an institution which Christ established; it is also, and mysteriously, his body in the world (LG 7; cf. Eph 1:23; Col 1:18). As

his humanity provided a body for the historical Jesus, so now does the Church provide a body for the glorified Christ to continue his saving presence and action in the world. Hence it is ‘the universal sacrament of salvation’ (LG 48), the outward sign in the world of the grace who is God’s Christ. Where this Church acts for the salvation of humankind, it is Christ who acts. Where this Church preaches the gospel, baptizes, cares for the afflicted, in Augustine’s words, it is Christ who preaches, baptizes, and cares.

‘Christ is the light of the nations.’ Any light in the Church is but a reflection of the light of Christ. Christ is the sun and the Church but a moon reflecting the sun’s light to the world.”

This reflection on “communion” in Lumen Gentium leads us, therefore, to understand that the Church exists precisely to be the sacrament of Christ’s presence and salvation to the world, directed and energized by the Holy Spirit.

This is, then, the Trinitarian and Christological background that we bring with us here to this important Chrism Mass. It is in light of this “ecclesial communion,” a communion deeply rooted in the Trinity, that we understand both the loving recommitment that our ordained priests will make public at this liturgy tonight and which the faithful will acknowledge with their own pledge of prayerful support. It is in light of this “ecclesial communion,” rooted in our unity and equality in Jesus, that the oil of catechumens, the oil of the sick and the sacred chrism will be blessed and consecrated for the future spiritual needs of God’s holy people, made up of clergy, religious and laity alike. It is in light of this “ecclesial communion,” always rooted in love of Christ for the Father and the Father’s love for the Son as well as the people redeemed by His Blood, that we will be nourished and strengthened by the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus in a holy communion whereby the presence of Christ continues to direct us in the mission of the Triune God.

And yet, I am also painfully aware that there are forces present in our Church these days that threaten our “ecclesial communion,” and would reduce it to a weakened state of relationship.

A few years ago, at the height of the terrible sexual abuse scandals in our Church, I was struck by a comment made by Father Stephen Rossetti, the famous author and psychologist. He said that the most astonishing aspect which he experienced from the media reports during that horrific time of scandalous accusations was the anger and judgementalism which was expressed from *within* the Church, both from the right, the left and the middle. I call Father Rossetti’s words to mind at this juncture in our local history as I prepare to receive the recommendations of the Strategic Planning Task Force for our Parishes and Schools. Allow me to express at this time my deep gratitude to the members of that Task Force who have worked so efficiently and comprehensively in response to the charge that I gave them a little over a year ago. At present, no decisions have been made and even I do not know what the recommendations will be, but I am quite certain that the Task Force *will*, in fact, recommend changes that will affect us all. In one way or another, these changes will touch all of us and impact our ecclesial communion.

The challenge, of course, will be how we all react to those proposed changes. In some dioceses, like my own hometown Archdiocese of Detroit, such changes were met with anger,

rancor, dissent and disaffiliation. Any notion of “ecclesial communion” was lost to the pain that was felt in seeing venerable communities rearranged or eliminated. Thus, the people of Detroit’s vision of seeing themselves as an evangelizing Church, seeking to fulfill the mission of Jesus, was lost in a cloud of negativity, to the point that the gift of communion, which is the Church’s identity, almost vanished from sight.

My dear brothers and sisters, our own vision of being Church, must be rooted in the “communion” of life, love and truth that we share as the universal Body of Christ in this Archdiocese. Of course, we should expect that “communion” will always be supported in our parish communities, but going forward, this may happen in ways that we have not previously experienced. More than likely, the proposed recommendations will require new ways of thinking on the part of pastors and parishioners alike. They will require that weekly routines be altered and yes, even *lives* be adjusted. But our response to the mission of Christ must remain ever the same, one full of hope, knowing that we are united in our witness to the presence of Christ, who is the way, the life and the truth.

At this time, I would like to address a special word to you, my brother priests, for whom I have a special love and affection. In this process of changing parish realities, much of the burden of leadership will fall on your shoulders. In reference to an earlier discussion about the communion of the Trinity as well as the communion of Christ with his heavenly Father, we find a model of our own relationship with God as well as the goal of our ministry as pastors in building up our respective community of faith. Obviously, our lives as priests, as men who have been set aside for sacred service, must likewise be marked by a special communion, specifically a communion with Jesus. Without an intimacy with Jesus, the life of the priest is an enigma, an infertile bachelorhood that can so quickly become an ego trip; that is to say, a life committed to building up my own kingdom, my own pet project, my own vision of what the Church should be rather than what she is called by Christ to be. But when the life of the priest is joined to Jesus, he sees that he is called to be a shepherd after the heart of Christ, calling his people together into a unified family of faith. Indeed, the mission of the priest is meant to be that bridge between God and his people, joining them together around the Holy Eucharist.

Our Holy Father has, of course, dedicated this year to priests and has written extensively on the importance of personal sanctity for our mission and success. Recently, speaking with the priests of Rome, His Holiness reminded his co-workers that “[the mission of the priest . . .] is to be a mediator, a bridge that unites and thus brings man to God, to His redemption, to His true light, to His true life.”

But if we are to be ambassadors of God’s life and love, we must come to know personally that life and love through a daily routine of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, visits to the sick and homebound, teaching the ignorant, and calling sinners, including ourselves, to repentance.

To be sure, we are living in times that are trying, difficult, and for many of us, so very different than when we were ordained. I have even heard some say, “This is not the ship I signed on to” and, of course, there is some truth to that. But it *is* the ship we are on, as vulnerable, weak and sinful as some of the crew members may be. But just as Jesus told Peter and his companions who were being buffeted by a major storm on the Sea of Galilee, we cannot be afraid and we must not let our hearts be troubled.

You and I can say with Peter, “Lord, we have put aside everything to follow you.” And let us admit that, at times, perhaps there can be some regret in our saying so. But that occasional, natural regret should turn to confidence and joy when we hear Jesus’ ageless reply, “I give you my word, there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother or father, children or property, for me and for the gospel who will not receive in this present age a hundred times as many homes, brothers and sisters, mothers, children and property – and persecution besides – and in the age to come, everlasting life.” (Mark 10: 29-30)

Jesus is present to us in our strengths and in our weakness. He is present in the successful moments of our ministry and in those that are most disappointing or frustrating.

He is present because we are his priests, ordained to serve his people with his love, his compassion and his joy. We are so much more than mere functionaries; we are his “other self” even as we struggle to be his holy and humble servants.

Surely we do not need to add any more programs to our already demanding schedules, but we can encourage each other to do what we are already doing with greater fidelity, with greater attentiveness, with a spirit of greater joy. The surest way to do this is through our relationship with Jesus and that is only accomplished in quiet moments of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We must encourage one another in this regard whenever and as often as we gather together.

Finally, I wish to address all of you dear brothers and sisters in Christ, by offering for your prayerful reflection the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman who once consoled others on how to love the Church in difficult times:

“Trust the Church of God implicitly even when your natural judgment would take a different course from hers and would induce you to question her prudence or correctness. Recollect what a hard task she has; how she is sure to be criticized and spoken against, whatever she does; recollect how much she needs your loyal and tender devotion; recollect too, how long is the experience gained in 1,800 years; and what a right she has to claim your assent to principles which have had so extended and triumphant a trial. Thank her that she has kept the faith safe for so many generations and help her to transmit it to generations after you.”

Las lecturas de hoy nos hablan de la oración, espiritualidad y el servicio de Jesús como al “consagrado” de Dios. El satisface la voluntad de su padre a través del poder del Espíritu Santo. La misión de la trinidad es de “comunión” y por consiguiente, eso se convierte en la misión de la iglesia.

La comunión es la enseñanza central de la constitución dogmática Lumen Gentium del Segundo Concilio del Vaticano. Como tal, hoy se debe centrar en nuestra misión en esta archidiócesis. Debemos estar dispuestos a poner a un lado nuestras necesidades personales para edificar esta comunión de vida, amor y verdad. Mientras que nuestras parroquias son llamados para ser una comunidad, pero aún más, ellos son llamados para ser una “comunión” en oración, espiritualidad y servicio.

As you and I continue this beautiful Eucharistic celebration and are fed with the very Body and Blood of the Lord, let us open our hearts and our wills to live in that “ecclesial communion” of life, love and truth to which we have all been called.

“Day by day, day by day
O dear Lord, three things I pray:
To see Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly
Day by day by day by day by day.”