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THE SPIRIT ANOINTS THE PRIESTS AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

**Chrism Mass
Holy Thursday
23 March 1978**

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

Revelation 1:5-8

Luke 4:16-21

...¹, as the people of God who have come together this morning with the bishop, you are a most eloquent sign of the merciful presence of the Redeemer in the world.

Dear religious sisters and dear faithful, in today's gospel we find the model of a good homily. After Christ reads the biblical passage from Isaiah, he says these words: «Today, these things are fulfilled» (Luke 4:21). This is the role of the homily: to say that the word of God that has been read is not a history of the past but something that is happening now in our midst. And this is always the case: wherever the Mass is celebrated and the word of God proclaimed by a priest or any Christian, there that word is coming true and is illuminating that reality in a special way. This is precisely what is happening here, sisters and brothers, on this morning of Holy Thursday. Today those things are being accomplished. What things? Why, the marvelous reality of the Spirit of God who has anointed humanity with his own dignity and made us participants in the divine life. This is the Mass of the Holy Chrism, the Mass in which we render homage to the Holy Spirit who anoints priests with his divine power to make them ministers of God's mercy for the people, and this is the Mass in which he also anoints the people with the priestly character which you, dear lay folk, received on the day of your baptism.

What is anointing? Anointing means sharing in the divine powers and in the divine dignity. That is why 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 humanity's anointing by the Holy Spirit. We are reminded that this morning we celebrate three kinds of anointing: first, the personal anointing of Christ; second, the anointing of us who minister as priests; and third, the anointing of God's people by the Spirit of God.

The personal anointing of Christ

First of all, Christ is the anointed one. That is what the word «Christ» means: anointed one, the one anointed par excellence. For us to be anointed the sacred oil must be applied to us, but no sacrament had to be administered to Christ because his humanity was anointed from the very beginning of his existence. The anointing of Christ happened when the Holy Spirit formed a human being, body and soul, in the womb of Mary as announced by the angel (Luke 1:35). That

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

body and soul that became the man Christ was assumed by the Holy Spirit to divine life in such a way that the members of Christ are at the same time members of God. He speaks the language of a man of earth, but his language directly transmits the message of God. He suffers the torments of the passion, but it is not simply a man who is suffering, for in this man is the dignity of God. The suffering in Christ's passion has redemptive power because his humanity was anointed in the womb of his most holy Mother with the power and the virtue of the Holy Spirit.

Christ, then, is the fullness and the source of divine anointing. Since God wanted to communicate his life to humanity, he began by making divine a man who is God at the same time he is a man. Christ is the Child-God, the young man, the mature man; he is God and he is man. This is the essential anointing of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now on this Holy Thursday morning we enter into reflection on the passion and resurrection of this man who redeemed the world and restored the life that had been lost through sin. What better entrance into the mystery than this celebration of the holy oils, the celebration of anointing! We could say that this morning is a feast in honor of the Holy Spirit who anoints Christ, and so we come to tell him, «Thank you, Divine Spirit who had the power to form in the Virgin's womb a human being capable of being anointed with the life of God».

The anointing of the priests

This life of God that Christ receives at the beginning of his life is a unique anointing, but this fullness of grace becomes the source of Christian anointing for all who come to believe in Christ. In order to carry this life of God whose source is Christ to the whole world and to all people, there is need for a channel, an organization, and that is what we priests are.

In every diocese a bishop is surrounded by these necessary collaborators, the priests, and they together, bishop and priests, are the instrument for bringing God's life to the people. They bring God's pardon to those who sin; they bring the consecrated host to the people who need nourishment; they bring God's pardon to the child stained by original sin; they bring the power of the Holy Spirit in the confirmation conferred by the bishop; they bestow blessing on love when a man and a woman want to make their love a sign of God's love—the priest gives divine meaning to that matrimonial love. And when the hour arrives to emigrate from earth to eternity, there also is the instrument of God's mercy, a priest administering viaticum, the final absolution, the anointing of the sick. The Spirit of God anoints the bodies of the infirm so that they become redeemed members of the crucified Christ and so have the power to undertake the journey into eternity.

Sisters and brothers, when we think this morning of the Holy Spirit's anointing of priests, be mindful of the great respect owed to these men who are today so reviled, like Christ the great benefactor of humanity who was so misunderstood. Priests preach the message of salvation, but it is distorted by others because it disturbs the world. They live close to the poor, the wretched, the *campesinos*, whom they love and defend. Like Christ our Lord they proclaim liberation to the poor, the oppressed, the prisoners, and all those who suffer. These priests are Christ in our midst. The Council states that Christ is present in the person of the bishop whom the priests are called to assist (LG 21). It is Christ who is present in them to teach, to sanctify, to govern, and to lead the people of God.

This morning when we celebrate our priesthood, I want to take this opportunity to address my beloved priests, those present in this ceremony and those unable to attend precisely because they are ministering in distant towns and villages. I want to tell my fellow priests: a thousand thanks, dear brothers. May God reward you for having been faithful to your vocation and especially for your communion with your bishop who, although the most unworthy of priests, is the sign of priestly unity on whom the whole spiritual life of the diocese depends. That is why the priest must be in communion with the bishop. Priestly ministry cannot be understood apart from the bishop. The words the priest proclaims in the parish church will not be understood if they are 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 connected with the one who is the wellspring of the diocese because he is a sign of the wellspring that is Christ. Therefore, thank you, beloved priests, because almost all of you give this witness of communion with your bishop.

If in any way I have offended any priest so that there is not fully unity between us, I ask your pardon, dear brothers, especially on this morning when Christ urges our priestly unity as a sign for the people of God of his presence, his grace, and his life. I want to tell you that the bishop desires nothing as much as the unity of his priests, and nothing causes him greater affliction than division, separation, and disunity among his priests. The people are demanding this unity because they are the ones who suffer when this unity does not exist. Likewise, it is the people who benefit from our exuberant spiritual life when we remain united with the bishop and when both bishop and priests try to be united with Christ our Lord, the source of the grace we all share together. Therefore, my brother priests, this morning our priestly responsibility is the primary object of our celebration. This Holy Thursday morning our priestly ordination is symbolized in the sacred oils that you will bring forward to be blessed and that will become a source of life for the people.

Dear brother priests, how wonderful it is to recall that unforgettable morning when our extended hands were anointed by the bishop with that same holy chrism that we are now going to consecrate! I remember the day I was anointed a bishop very well. It was in 1970, on June 21, in the stadium of the Marist Brothers, in the presence of many people who saw the anointing of the bishop as a catechetical moment. Sacred chrism like that which I am now going to consecrate was poured over my head to make me pastor. At that time I served as a collaborator of our venerated elder, Bishop Chávez y González, whom I now have the unmerited honor of succeeding. I am sure that you also, beloved priests, remember the unforgettable morning of your priestly ordination. How beautiful it was for you, brothers, and for the faithful and your family members. How wonderful it is for the towns and villages that are now 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 from their mother's womb for this great priestly vocation.

This morning all of us priests are going to renew our priestly commitment, and we ask you, the people of God, to pray hard for us so that we will be worthy of this anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers us through the priestly character that has been marked on our soul forever. It is the Holy Spirit we offend when we despise our priests. It is the Spirit of God we honor when we pay heed—as you honor me this morning in paying heed to me—not to the words of men but to the one whom Christ spoke of in his homily: «The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor» (Luke 4:18). Christ continues to say this about his priests: «The Spirit of God is upon them». I thank you, sisters

and brothers, for your many prayers and for your expressions of solidarity with the teaching of the bishop during this past year. It was a difficult year, but also a consoling year in which we've seen the word of God flourish everywhere thanks to the unity, the collaboration, and the fidelity with which all the priests are trying to be true servants of God, of his Word, of his Spirit. They do so for the sake of all of you, a people called by God to be also a priestly people.

The Spirit of God anoints the whole people

And this is my third thought: the anointing that we celebrate this morning is not only the personal anointing of Christ in his human nature, which became so intimately united with the nature of God. Nor is it only a commemoration of the anointing of the priests on the day of their ordination. These anointings are all done in service to you, sisters and brothers, as Christ himself said, «I have not come to be served but to serve and to give my life for you» (Matt 20:28). And so each one of us priests knows that we have not been ordained for ourselves but for you. If we do anything for ourselves, it is not because of our priestly ordination but because of the baptism which we received along with you.

This morning here in the Cathedral of San Salvador I make mine the words of that 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 own redemption and salvation. The name of «bishop» is a responsibility that makes me tremble, but at the same time it makes me trust in the power of God who has given me this job.

Each priest can say the same thing: «For you we are priests. For you we are servants of the people, and with you we are Christians». Before being priests we are Christians—we are Christians with you. We believe the same truths, we share the same hope, we try to love one another as you do. We all have to love one another as a sign of Christianity. Before being priests or bishop we are Christians, we are the people of God. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, let us understand one another mutually in this sublime ministry of the priesthood. And may you, as a priestly people, come to understand your own greatness. The Holy Spirit anointed you, and we priests were his instruments at the baptismal font not only when the water washed away original sin but also when the chrism we are now going to consecrate anointed the head of the child being baptized to signify that from that moment on that child shared in the life of Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King.

And so all of you sisters and brothers, religious and lay, bear the seal of the Holy Spirit's anointing, the mark of a Christian, even if you have received no sacrament other than baptism. You are the people of God, anointed to be a priestly people, a prophetic people, a people who are to reign with Christ and make the divine principles of the Gospel prevail. You are a priestly people immersed in so many different occupations in the world. Think of all the different occupations that are present here, sharing in this reflection: there are perhaps professionals, teachers, workers, farmers, market vendors, housewives, cooks—you are all the people of God sanctifying all those different parts of the world. Your holiness in your work is the holiness that sanctifies the world.

This morning, 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

² AUGUSTINE, *Sermons*, 340, 1, PL 38, 1483.

incorporated us into his Mystical Body so that we might prolong Christ's presence in the world and in history. Christ, who through baptism made us members of his body, is asking us, sisters and brothers, to understand our dignity and our responsibility and to make our lives a true sacrament of the mercy, the grace, the truth, and the justice of our God. You are a prophetic people, a people proclaiming the wondrous works of God and denouncing the evils of humankind. You are a people united in the holiness of our doctrine, and you support God's demands against those who trample on human dignity and abuse their power and their wealth. You are a prophetic people who proclaim the justice of the Lord. That is why it is hard to understand how someone baptized can be a coward, much less a traitor like Judas. As a people anointed by the Holy Spirit, we all have this responsibility.

Dear sisters and brothers, we are now going to consecrate the three oils that will be brought to the altar. This is a threefold consecration. First is the consecration of Christ the eternal Priest, the unique Prophet, the universal King. But, second, Christ has also consecrated these beloved priests and this your unworthy servant with his own dignity as priest, prophet, and king, in order to guide the people of God in priestly ministry. Third, he has anointed all of you as people of God so that we might celebrate the wonderful deeds of his redemption during this Holy Week. We do this not as something foreign to us but as a people with an anointing that identifies us with Christ. We the suffering Salvadoran people are Christ's protagonists as he carries his cross; we the tortured people are the protagonists of Christ who is dying on the cross but also of the Christ who after three days rose up, fulfilling our hopes. The Salvadoran people by baptism has become God's people. Let us honor this anointing that we now celebrate together as a priestly people, giving thanks to the Lord.