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Chrism Mass in the Vatican Basilica

At 9.30 this morning, Holy Thursday, in the Vatican Basilica, the Holy Father Francis presided over Chrism Mass, the liturgy celebrated on this day in all the Cathedral Churches.

The Chrism Mass was concelebrated by the Holy Father with the cardinals, the bishops, the vicar general of His Holiness and the vice gerent of the diocese of Rome with the priests (diocesan and religious) present in Rome.

During the Eucharistic celebration, the priests renewed the promises made at the moment of their ordination; this was followed by the blessing of the oil for the sick, the oil for catechumens, and the Chrism.

The following is the homily delivered by the Pope during the proclamation of the Holy Gospel:

Homily of the Holy Father

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (*Lk* 4:18). Jesus began his preaching with this verse, which also begins today’s first reading (cf. *Is* 61:1). At the beginning, then, the Spirit of the Lord is present.

Dear brothers in the priesthood, today I would like to reflect with you on the Holy Spirit. For without the Spirit of the Lord, there can be no Christian life; without his anointing, there can be no holiness. He is *at the centre* and it is fitting that today, on the birthday of the priesthood, we acknowledge his presence at the origin of our own ministry, and the life and vitality of every priest. Holy Mother Church teaches us to profess that the Holy Spirit is the “giver of life”.^[1] Jesus told us: “it is the Spirit that *gives life*” (*Jn* 6:63). His teaching was taken up by the apostle Paul, who wrote that “the letter kills, but the Spirit *gives life*” (*2 Cor* 3:6) and who spoke of the “law of the Spirit of *life* in Christ Jesus” (*Rom* 8:2). Without the Holy Spirit, the Church would not be the living Bride of Christ, but, at most, a religious association – more or less good, not the Body of Christ, but a temple built by

human hands. How then are we to build up the Church, if not beginning with the fact that we are “temples of the Holy Spirit” who “dwells in us” (cf. *1 Cor* 6:19; 3:16)? We cannot lock the Spirit out of the house, or park him in some devotional zone, no, he has to be at the centre! Each day we need to say: “Come, for without your strength, we are lost”. [2]

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Every one of us can say this, not out of presumption, but as a reality. For all Christians, and priests in particular, can apply to themselves the words that follow: “because the Lord has anointed me” (*Is* 61:1). Dear brothers, apart from any merit of our own, and by sheer grace, we have received an anointing that has made us fathers and shepherds among the holy People of God. Let us reflect, then, on this aspect of the Spirit: *his anointing*.

After his initial anointing, which took place in the womb of Mary, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the Jordan. Following that, as Saint Basil explains, “every act [of Christ] was performed with the co-presence of the Holy Spirit”. [3] In the power of that latter anointing, Jesus preached and worked signs; thanks to that anointing, “power came out from him and healed all” (*Lk* 6:19). Jesus and the Spirit always work together, like two hands of the Father [4] – as Irenaeus said – that reach out to embrace us and raise us up. By those hands, our own hands were sealed, anointed by the Spirit of Christ. Yes, brothers, the Lord has not only chosen us and called us to go to that place or another: he has poured out upon us the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who descended upon the apostles. Brothers, we are “the anointed”.

Let us now turn our attention to them, to the apostles. Jesus chose them and at his call, they left their boats, their nets and their homes and so on... The anointing of the Word changed their lives. With great enthusiasm, they followed the Master and began to preach, convinced that they would go on to accomplish even greater things. Then came the Passover. Everything seemed to come to a halt: they even denied and abandoned their Master. We should not be afraid. We are courageous when reading about our life and our failures, even denying and abandoning the Master, as Peter did. They came to grips with their own failure; they realized that they had not understood him. The words uttered by Peter in the courtyard of the high priest following the Last Supper – “I do not know this man” (*Mk* 14:71) – were not only an impulsive attempt at self-defense, but an admission of spiritual ignorance. He and the others perhaps expected a life of triumph behind the Messiah who drew crowds and worked wonders, but they failed to understand the scandal of the cross, which caused their certainties to collapse. Jesus knew that, on their own, they would not have succeeded, and so he promised to send them the Paraclete. It was precisely that “second anointing”, at Pentecost, that changed the disciples and led them to shepherd no longer themselves but the Lord’s flock. Here is the conflict to resolve: Am I a pastor of the Lord’s flock or of myself? The Spirit is there to show us the way. It was that anointing with fire that extinguished a “piety” focused on themselves and their own abilities. After receiving the Spirit, Peter’s fear and wavering dissipated; James and John, with a burning desire to give their lives, no longer sought places of honour (cf. *Mk* 10:35-45) which is careerism, brothers; the others who had huddled fearfully in the Upper Room, went forth into the world as apostles. The Spirit changes our heart and points it in a different direction.

Dear brothers, something similar happens in our own priestly and apostolic lives. We too experienced an initial anointing, which began with a loving call that captivated our hearts and set us out on the journey; the power of the Holy Spirit descended upon our genuine enthusiasm and consecrated us. Later, in God’s good time, each of us experienced a Passover, representing the moment of truth. A time of crisis which took various forms. Sooner or later, we all experience disappointment, frustration and our own weakness; our ideals seem to recede in the face of reality, a certain force of habit takes over, and difficulties that once seemed unimaginable appear to challenge our fidelity. For the anointed, this stage – this temptation, this trail which we have experienced, we are experiencing or will experience – is a watershed. We can emerge from it badly, drifting towards mediocrity and settling for a dreary routine, in which three dangerous temptations can arise. The temptation of *compromise*, where we are content just to do what has to be done; the temptation of *surrogates*, where to find satisfaction we look not to our anointing, but elsewhere; and the temptation of *discouragement* – which is very common – where dissatisfaction leads to inertia. This is the great danger: while outward appearances remain intact – “I am a priest, I am priest” – we close in upon ourselves and are content just to get by. The fragrance of our anointing no longer wafts through our lives; our hearts no longer expand but shrivel, disillusioned and disenchanting. This is the problem, you know? When the priesthood slowly degenerates into clericalism and the priest forgets that he is a pastor of the people and becomes instead a cleric of the state.

Yet this crisis also has the potential to be a turning point in our priesthood, the “decisive stage of the spiritual life, in which the ultimate choice has to be made between Jesus and the world, between heroic charity and mediocrity, between the cross and comfort, between holiness and dutiful fidelity to our religious obligations”. [5] At the end of this celebration, they will give you a gift, a classic, a book that talks about this problem: “The second calling”. It is a classic by Father Voillaume who touches on this problem. Read it. All of us need to reflect on this moment in our priesthood. It is that grace-filled moment when, like the disciples at Easter, we are called to be “sufficiently humble to admit that we have been won over by the suffering and crucified Christ, and to set out on a new journey, *that of the Spirit*, of faith and of a love that is strong, yet without illusions”. [6] It is the *kairos* that enables us to realize that “it is not enough to abandon boat and nets in order to follow Jesus for certain time; it also demands going to Calvary, learning its lesson and receiving its fruit, and persevering with the help of the Holy Spirit to the end of a life meant to conclude in the perfection of divine charity”. [7] *With the help of the Holy Spirit*: for us as for the apostles, it is the time of a “second anointing”, the time of our second calling, to which we have to listen; the second anointing in which the Spirit is poured out no longer on the enthusiasm of our hopes and dreams, but on the freedom of our concrete situation. An anointing that penetrates to the depths of our reality, where the Spirit anoints our weaknesses, our weariness, our inner poverty. An anointing that brings a new fragrance: that of the Spirit, not of ourselves. At this very moment, inwardly, I am thinking of some of you who are in crisis – let’s say – who are disoriented and do not know how find their way, how to get back on the road of this second anointing of the Spirit. To these brothers – of whom I am thinking – I simply say: courage, the Lord is greater than your weaknesses, your sins. Trust the Lord and let yourself be called a second time, this time with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. A double life will not help you; not a chance, throw everything out the window. Look ahead, let yourself be caressed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

This happens when we take the mature step of admitting the reality of our own weakness. That is what “the Spirit of truth (*Jn 16:13*) tells us to do; he prompts us to look deep within and to ask: Does my fulfilment depend on my abilities, my position, the compliments I receive, my promotions, the respect of my superiors or coworkers, the comforts with which I surround myself? Or on the anointing that spreads its fragrance everywhere in my life? Dear brothers, priestly maturity comes from the Holy Spirit and is achieved when he becomes the protagonist in our lives. Once that happens, everything turns around, even disappointments and bitter experiences – and also sins – since we are no longer trying to find happiness by adjusting details, but by giving ourselves completely to the Lord who anointed us and who wants that anointing to penetrate to the depths of our being. Brothers, let us rediscover that the spiritual life becomes liberating and joyful, once we are no longer concerned to save appearances and make quick fixes, but leave the initiative to the Spirit and, in openness to his plans, show our willingness to serve wherever and however we are asked. Our priesthood does not grow by quick fixes but by an overflow of grace!

If we allow the Spirit of Truth to act within us, *we will preserve his anointing*, because the various untruths – the hypocrisy of clericalism – with which we are tempted to live will come to light immediately. And the Spirit who “cleanses what is unclean”, will tirelessly suggest to us “not to defile our anointing”, even in the least. We think of that phrase of the Preacher, who says that “dying flies spoil the sweetness of the ointment” (10:1). It is true, every form of duplicity – especially clerical duplicity – that insinuates itself is dangerous: it must not be tolerated, but brought into the light of the Spirit. For “the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse, and who can heal it?” (*Jer 17:9*). The Holy Spirit, he alone, heals our infidelities (cf. *Hos 14:4*). For us, this an unavoidable struggle: it is indispensable, as Saint Gregory the Great wrote, that “those who proclaim the word of God, must first be concerned with their own way of life; then, based on his own life, he can learn what to say and how to say it... Let no one presume to say more than what first he heard within”. [8] The Spirit is that interior teacher to whom we must listen, recognizing that he desires to anoint every part of us. Brothers, let us preserve our anointing, invoking the Spirit not as an occasional act of piety, but as the breath of each day. Come, come, and preserve our anointing. Consecrated by him, I am called to immerse myself in him, to make his life penetrate my darkness – and we all have this darkness – so that I can rediscover the truth of who and what I am. Let us allow ourselves to be impelled by him to combat the untruths that struggle within us. And let us allow ourselves to be reborn from him through adoration, for when we adore the Lord, he pours forth into our hearts his Spirit.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me”, so the prophecy continues, to bring good news, liberty, healing and grace (cf. *Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:18-19*): in a word, to bring *harmony* wherever it is lacking. As Saint Basil said: “the Spirit is harmony”, he is the one that brings

harmony. After speaking to you about anointing, I would like to say something to you about the harmony that is its consequence. Because the Holy Spirit is harmony. Above all in heaven: Saint Basil notes that “all supercelestial and unspeakable harmony in the service of God and in the mutual symphony of the supercosmic powers, would be impossible to preserve, if not for the authority of the Spirit”.^[9] As well as on earth: in the Church, the Spirit is that “divine and musical harmony”^[10] that binds everything together. Let us think of a Presbyterate without harmony, without the Spirit: it would not work. He awakens the diversity of charisms and brings them into unity; he creates concord based not on uniformity, but on the creativity of charity. In this way, he creates harmony from multiplicity. In this way, he creates harmony in the Presbyterate. At the time of the Second Vatican Council, itself a gift of the Spirit, a theologian published a study in which he spoke of the Spirit not as individual, but as plural. He suggested thinking of the Spirit as a divine person who is not only singular but “plural”, as the “We of God”, the “We” of the Father and of the Son, since he is their bond. The Holy Spirit is *in himself* concord, communion and harmony.^[11] I remember when I read this theological treatise – it was when I was studying theology – I was scandalized: it seemed like heresy, because in our training we did not quite understand who the Holy Spirit was.

To create harmony is what the Spirit desires, above all through those upon whom he has poured out his anointing. Brothers, building harmony among ourselves is not simply a good way of improving the functioning of ecclesial structures, it is not the *minuet* dance, or a matter of strategy or politeness: it is an intrinsic demand of the life of the Spirit. We sin against the Spirit who is communion whenever we become, even unintentionally, instruments of division. For example, I would mention again the topic of gossip. When we become instruments of division we sin against the Spirit. And whenever we play the game of the enemy, who never comes out into the open, who loves gossip and insinuation, foments parties and cliques, fuels nostalgia for times past, distrust, pessimism and fear. Let us take care, please, not to defile the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the robe of Holy Mother Church with disunity, polarization or lack of charity and communion. Let us remember that the Spirit, as “the We of God”, prefers the “shape” of community: willingness with regard to one’s own needs, obedience with regard to one’s own tastes, humility with regard to one’s own claims.

Harmony is not one virtue among others; it is something more. As Saint Gregory the Great writes: “the worth of the virtue of concord is shown by the fact that without it, the other virtues have no value whatsoever”.^[12] Let us help one another, brothers, to preserve harmony – this is the task – starting not from others but each of us from himself. Let us ask ourselves: In my words, in my comments, in what I say and write, is there the seal of the Spirit or that of the world? Do I think about the *kindness of the priest* – but more often than not, we priests, we are rude – let us think about the kindness of the priest: if people see, in us too, people who are dissatisfied and discontented bachelors, who criticize and point fingers, where else will they find harmony? How many people fail to approach us, or keep at a distance, because in the Church they feel unwelcomed and unloved, regarded with suspicion and judged? In God’s name, let us be welcoming and forgiving, always! And let us remember that being irritable and full of complaints does not produce good fruits, but spoils our preaching, since it is a counter-witness to God, who is communion in harmony. Above all, it displeases greatly the Holy Spirit, whom the apostle Paul urges us not to grieve (cf. *Eph 4:30*).

Dear brothers, I leave you with these thoughts that come from my heart, and I conclude with two simple and important words: Thank you. Thank you for your witness and for your service. Thank you for the hidden good you do, and for the forgiveness and consolation that you bestow in God’s name. Always forgive, please, do not withhold forgiveness. Thank you for your ministry, which is often carried out with great effort, with little recognition and is not always understood. Brothers, may the Spirit of God, who does not disappoint those who trust in him, fill you with peace and bring to conclusion the good work he began in you, so that you may be prophetic witnesses of his anointing and apostles of harmony.

[1] Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

[2] Cf. Sequence for the Solemnity of Pentecost.

[3] *De Spiritu Santo*, 16, 39.

[4] Cf. IRENAEUS, *Adv. Haer.*, IV, 20, 1.

[5] R. VOILLAUME, “La seconda chiamata”, in S. STEVEN, ed. *La seconda chiama. Il coraggio della fragilità*,

Bologna. 2018, 15.

[6] *Ibid.*, 24.

[7] *Ibid.*, 16.

[8] *Homilies on Ezekiel*, I, X, 13-14.

[9] *De Spiritu Sancto*, XVI, 38.

[10] *In Ps. 29*, 1.

[11] Cf. H. MÜHLEN, *Der Heilige Gest als Person. Ich-Du-Wir*, Münster in W., 1963.

[12] *Homilies on Ezekiel*, I, VIII, 8.
