

# The Celebration of the Chrism Mass in the Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph Status Questions

**September 12, 1991**

This paper is intended to facilitate an evaluation of the Chrism Mass as it is celebrated in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. The request for this paper comes from largely informal discussions among priests of the diocese who question the trends established in recent years of our celebration of this event: For example, moving the time of the celebration from morning to evening, encouraging stronger lay participation, transposing the jubilarian dinner to another occasion, a changing of style of liturgical music and ritual.

Underlying the specific question of our diocesan celebration is a more general question about the **nature of the Chrism Mass itself**. A simple examination of the texts and rubrics for the rite reveals it strives to present the following themes:

- The role of the bishop as high priest of his flock and source of unity for the diocesan presbyterate
- The blessing of oils for liturgical use
- A celebration of priesthood
- The renewal of commitment to priestly service
- The priesthood of all believers
- The gathering of the diocese in the cathedral

Obviously, for one service to explore all these themes at once is a task which will weaken them all by the sheer multiplication of motifs. The current Mass of Chrism gathered these themes by an arduous **historical process**. Its principal lines are delineated below:

**3rd century:** The very earliest witnesses to the baptism ritual (Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Cyprian) all agree that some 'blessed oil' is used in the rite. One assumes a ritual for 'blessing' the oil must have existed. Hippolytus alone indicates it was part of the baptismal liturgy itself.

The existence of **thee separate oils** is quite ancient. The consecration of chrism was reserved to bishops from the beginning, and later centuries insisted upon this practice. The blessing of the oil of exorcism (later, of 'catechumens') and of the oil of the sick quickly became the provenance of presbyters, since they were baptizing and caring for the sick in their pastoral duties.

The **time** for the celebration of the blessings was gradually fixed at Holy Thursday. This answered a very practical necessity: New oils were required for baptisms at the Easter Vigil. Rather than weigh down the Vigil with yet another rite, the blessings were moved to the next earliest day when Eucharist was celebrated -- namely, Holy Thursday. This also allowed time for presbyters, deacons, or sacristans to bring the chrism from the cathedral to the parishes in the outlying areas. In Rome, presbyters blessed the oil of exorcism in their parishes, while the bishop (the Pope), consecrated the chrism at the cathedral church of St. John Lateran.

By the **middle ages** the blessing of all three oils at one service naturally evolved, and the rituals became more elaborate. In Rome the one Mass of Holy Thursday served for the commemoration of the Lord's Supper and the blessing of oils. By the 13th century, the priests gathered for the service were invited to

join in the prayers of blessing with the bishop. With relatively minor adjustments, the liturgy remained the same till the 20th century.

**In 1955** the rites of Holy Week were revised for the universal Church. The celebration of Holy Thursday became marked by two separate Masses, one in the morning for Chrism, the other in the evening for the Lord's Supper. New Mass texts were compiled for the Chrism Mass, including readings about the anointing of the sick.

The liturgical reforms of **Vatican II** asked that the liturgy become simplified and more easily comprehended. The Council asked that the Chrism Mass represent the bishop gathered with his flock, and the readings for the day became more general (Isaiah 61 and Luke 4).

However, by the late sixties historical developments around the world forced yet another revision onto the Mass of Chrism. Many priests were resigning their ministry, clerical celibacy was widely questioned, acquiescence to the hierarchy was rattled by fallout from *Humane vitae*, and the Bishops of Holland met in council to seek further dramatic reforms. In response, John Cardinal Wright, prefect of the Congregation of the Clergy, wrote the presidents of episcopal conferences suggesting that "on Holy Thursday morning every priest, whether he be present at the Mass of the Chrism or not, renew the act whereby he dedicated himself to Christ and promised that he would carry out his priestly duties." *Observatore Romano* reprinted the letter in February, 1970, together with a text for the renewal of priestly promises and a newly composed preface on priesthood -- both for celebrations of the Chrism Mass. The following month *Notitiae* reprinted these texts explaining that the Chrism Mass is "an expression of the communion between the priests and their bishop." The revised lectionary included a new second reading from Revelation 1: "He makes us a kingdom of priests to his God and Father." The Chrism Mass was becoming for the first time in history a "feast for priests."

**Thus**, a celebration that began as a practical necessity to consecrate chrism for baptism expanded into a celebration for blessing three oils (including one for the sick), a celebration of the diocesan church, and the dedication of priests.

In the **Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph** we added to this a celebration of recognition for jubilarians, thus strengthening the priesthood theme by adding to it the notion of "affirmation". In recent years, that practice was called into question by priests and laity alike, and the Presbyteral Council agreed to recommend that the jubilarian celebration be moved to a later date, that the Mass of Chrism be celebrated in the evening, and that lay ministers be invited to participate. Since that time, many priests have felt hurt. They believed that once a year the cathedral hosted a celebration to affirm their ministry, and now this was being taken away. Further, some argued that the perceived emphasis on lay ministry in the diocese carried with it a dark side of anti-clericalism. In an age when few men consider priesthood as a vocation, in an age when priestly identity and ministry have been drastically changed, in an age when priests -- many of whom spent years in formation and suffered emotional stress over the decision for seminary and celibacy -- see lay ministers take on many of their former responsibilities, priesthood has reached a delicate juncture: The very ministers who led the Church unchallenged in previous generations find themselves the subjects of great criticism and powerlessness. The Chrism Mass in our diocese seems to have evolved as a symbol of his loss for some of our priests.

The following questions may help us to evaluate the Chrism Mass:

- What is the central purpose of the Chrism Mass?
- How may our celebration of Chrism best bring out that purpose?
- How can we best affirm priesthood in our diocese?
- Who else should be part of this discussion?