

Perfume is a costly gift, and it has costly expectations. You may buy perfume for someone who absorbs a lot of your attention, even when your mind is at rest. We expect that those who receive such a gift will also love the giver, that the gift will empower them to love the giver. Perfume is costly to give and to receive.

In the Catholic Church we use two perfumes for special occasions. Incense is intended to make the room smell nice. Not everyone agrees it achieves that goal. But the idea is to make the room pleasant, in the same way you set out potpourri at home, spray air freshener in the bathroom, and dangle those little evergreens over the rear-view mirror of your car.

The other Catholic perfume is chrism. We use it infrequently. We anoint newly baptized infants, those being confirmed, and priests and bishops when they are ordained – priests on their hands, bishops on the head. We also anoint the walls of a new church and the top of a new altar with chrism. But that's it. We use chrism for unrepeatable ceremonies because it is so powerful. It consecrates whatever it touches. Only a bishop can make chrism, and by design only a bishop uses it. We priests use it at baptism and the occasional confirmation as an extension of the work of the bishop. In addition to all its exceptional properties, chrism smells great. Traditionally it is olive oil perfumed with balsam. Today, we may use other ingredients, as long as they smell nice.

The prayer for consecrating chrism explains its purpose; it does not focus on priesthood; it focuses on baptism. It thanks God for life and the sacraments. It reminds us that priests, prophets and kings were anointed with oil in the Old Testament, and that Jesus was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism. He is called the Christ, which means the Anointed One, and we receive the same anointing at our baptism. We all share the ministry of Christ who is priest, prophet and king, and we use his Spirit.

Perfume is expensive, and so is chrism. Just as you expect the person who receives a gift of perfume to direct their body and heart to you, so does the Church. At confirmation, the minister anoints with these words: "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit." It is a costly gift. We are expected to use the gift for the sake of the Church, and it empowers us to do so.

Our season of penitence is coming to a close, but before it does, the Church gives us a whiff of eternal glory. The chrism consecrated tonight will anoint the newly baptized at the Easter Vigil next week. As you behold it and smell it, let it remind you of the giver, a God who loves you, a Spirit who empowers you, and a Christ with whom you share ministry. We all have moments when service is hard, because we are tired, because the people we serve do not appreciate us, or because the results seem not to equal our efforts. We need reassurance that Christ is there, releasing the Holy Spirit. But he has already given us the Spirit, helping us achieve what God most wants. Whenever we serve others – especially when it is hard – we return our love to the one who gave us the gift.