

**2024 Chrism Mass Homily**  
**Most Reverend John O. Barres**  
**Diocese of Rockville Centre**  
**St. Agnes Cathedral**  
**Tuesday, March 26, 2024**

The Chrism Mass, celebrated during Holy Week in every diocese throughout the world, manifests the communion of a local Church.

For whenever the People of God -- clergy, consecrated religious, lay men and women -- are gathered around their Diocesan Bishop to worship God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we are today, the unity of the Church is revealed.

This Chrism Mass shows our communion in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, and it reminds us of who we are: one people from every people and tongue, given new life through Baptism, and called to holiness and mission, each according to their state in life.

At the Chrism Mass, we bless the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick, and we consecrate the Sacred Chrism. The rite is powerful. Oils are brought forth, the Holy Spirit is outpoured, and the beauty and power of our sacramental life is again made clear: God takes a thing of the earth – humble oil - and sets it apart, so that, through the holy oils, He can encounter His people.

Celebrated so near to Holy Thursday, the day on which the sacred priesthood was instituted by Our Lord, the Chrism Mass also proclaims the gift of the priesthood, and reminds us, bishops and priests, of our responsibility to safeguard the communion bestowed by Christ.

As we celebrate this Chrism Mass 2024 at the Cathedral of Saint Agnes, I greet those watching on the *Catholic Faith Network*, and I welcome parishioners from around Long Island who have journeyed to worship in our beautiful cathedral today.

I welcome, especially, students from our evangelizing Catholic high schools who are present with their teachers, as well as university students from our Catholic

campus ministries. Thank you, dear young people, for your witness of faith and pursuit of holiness.

I greet, too, our consecrated religious men and women. Brothers and sisters, the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience you live each day, your life of prayer, and your dedication to your various apostolates are all gifts to this local Church.

My brother deacons, thank you for your presence and your *diakonia* in parishes, prisons, hospitals, and so many other places across Long Island.

Bishop Murphy, Bishop Dunne, Bishop Coyle, Bishop Andrzej, and Bishop Romero, my brother bishops, and my brother priests, my closest collaborators in mission, thank you for concelebrating this Mass and for your selfless service throughout the year.

Today, let us pray for our brothers who have gone to God, and as our priestly promises are renewed this afternoon, let us ask the Holy Spirit to deepen our resolve to be good shepherds who serve in imitation of the Master, unafraid of the cost of discipleship.

Our seminarians here present, including Deacon Dennis Gannon and Deacon Joseph Lettieri, who will be ordained priests on June 8th, remind us that God still calls. With them, we pray for a rich harvest of vocations as we recommit to casting our nets in every parish and school on Long Island.

Our Chrism Mass 2024 occurs during the National Eucharistic Revival, a time appointed by the Bishops of the United States for all Catholics to grow in understanding and love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, really and truly present in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Let's allow the Eucharistic charity that flows from the Eucharistic Revival to touch the wounds of those suffering in Gaza and the Middle East, Ukraine, Nicaragua and Venezuela and all war torn and violence-ridden areas of the world.

As we gather during this time when we contemplate the Eucharist, the "source and summit of the Christian life,"<sup>1</sup> let us, dear brothers in the priesthood, before the people we serve, reflect on our responsibility to celebrate well, as sons of the Church, the mysteries with which we have been entrusted.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

As you know, at every Mass, the sacrifice of the Son, offered once and for all to the Father on Calvary, is made mysteriously present again.

How is this possible? God makes it so through the priest, who acts in the person of Christ the Head. Indeed, it is through the priest that the same Lord who instituted the Eucharist acts once more.<sup>2</sup>

The priest acts in the person of Christ the Head, but the entire Body of Christ, the Church, participates in the offering – with their “praise, sufferings, prayer, and work” - because “the Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the Church.”<sup>3</sup>

Dear brother priests, even a brief reflection like this on the Mass reveals the tremendous responsibility we bear when we offer the Eucharistic sacrifice as Christ the Head and draw together the offering of His Body, the Church. It is a responsibility to the Lord and to His people.

In a few moments, during the renewal of priestly promises, as part of the third question, I will ask: “Are you resolved to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God in the Holy Eucharist and the other liturgical rites?”

You will answer, “I am.”

Aware of the responsibility that is ours, let us look at what being a faithful steward means by reflecting on how we celebrate the sacred mysteries. To use a phrase introduced by Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007) and expounded upon by Pope Francis in *Desiderio Desideravi* (2022), let us reflect on our liturgical *ars celebrandi*.

What is *ars celebrandi*? It literally means “the art of celebrating,” and for both popes, it emerges first and foremost from a fidelity to the Church’s texts and rubrics.

It is more than this, of course, but the starting point, *sine qua non*, of a reverent and prayerful *ars celebrandi*, one which draws all into the mystery, is a humble reception of the liturgy as given by the Church.

This is key. As Pope Benedict says, “Attentiveness and fidelity to the specific structure of the rite express both a recognition of the nature of the Eucharist as a gift and, on the part of the minister, a docile openness to receiving this ineffable gift.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1348.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1368.

<sup>4</sup> *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 40.

With all that the Catholic liturgy entails, there is much to be attentive to beyond the texts and rubrics: music, gestures, vesture, the training of ministers, liturgical appointments, furnishings, sacred art. The list goes on, and as we know, everything matters. For when these things are cohesive and in harmony, they give glory to God and raise up our hearts and minds in prayer.

So, for the priest, the beginning of a proper *ars celebrandi* is a reception of what is given by the Church, as well as an attentiveness to detail for the sake of glorifying God. Coupled always to this is the priest's communion with his Diocesan Bishop who is 'the chief steward of the mysteries of God in the particular Church entrusted to his care.'"<sup>5</sup>

Thus, faithful to the Church, the priest's *ars celebrandi* emerges. Beautifully and mystically, it then serves and is enriched by the full, active, and fruitful participation of all the faithful. For, as Pope Benedict notes, there is a unity and interdependence between the two.<sup>6</sup>

The starting point is fidelity to the Church, but there is more to a priest's *ars celebrandi*. I offer four points for our reflection.

First, a Catholic priest's liturgical *ars celebrandi* is existential. It flows from an integration of Catholic theology and spirituality into his very being, into his very existence, into his baptismal call to holiness and mission and into that ontological change that occurred at his Ordination to the Priesthood.

It is grounded in his understanding, love, and passion for the theology and spirituality of the Mass, the Sacraments and every dimension of Catholic liturgy.

It is grounded in the intersection of the Catholic truths of Biblical Theology, Sacramental Theology, Dogmatic Theology, Moral Theology and Spiritual Theology.

Pope Francis states that "the art of celebration is not something that can be improvised. Like every art, it requires consistent application. For an artisan, technique is enough. But for an artist, in addition to technical knowledge, there has also to be an inspiration, which is a positive form of possession. The true artist does not possess an art but rather is possessed by it."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Desiderio Desideravi*, 50.

The great novelists, poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, and cinematographers have a core discipline of fundamentals to their craft that are constantly practiced and reinforced by sacrifice and dedication.

The same principle applies to the dedication of the Catholic priest, except that his very being is core to his *ars celebrandi* at every Mass.

Second, a priest's *ars celebrandi* is grounded in his "unity of life."<sup>8</sup> That unity of life has always focused on the unity and interdependence of a priest's spiritual life and his pastoral charity. A priest's spiritual life animates his pastoral charity. A priest's pastoral charity enriches and focuses his spiritual life.

But I think it is quite reasonable to assume that a priest's unity of life consists of three dimensions: 1) his spiritual life; 2) his evangelizing pastoral charity; and 3) his liturgical *ars celebrandi*.

Depth in a priest's spiritual life and evangelizing pastoral charity will be reflected in the natural and supernatural radiance of his *ars celebrandi*.

Superficiality in a priest's spiritual life and evangelizing pastoral charity will be reflected in his liturgical *ars celebrandi*. Pope Francis catalogued the harmful public results of a priest's liturgical superficiality in *Desiderio Desideravi* 54.

I need not repeat them here, but they make for a good Chrism Mass liturgical examination of conscience.

Submarine warfare movies whether it is the television classic *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* or *The Hunt for Red October* always involved depth charges<sup>9</sup> or deep underwater explosions.

At this Chrism Mass 2024, we ask the Holy Spirit to send a depth charge of grace deep within our being, deep within our ontology, to destroy pride, selfishness, anger, lust, clerical envy and gossip, greed, comfort and the good life, gluttony in the realm of food, drink, social media or gossip, laziness and our pitched resistances to grace, holiness, asceticism and discipline in mental prayer.

Third, a Catholic priest's liturgical *ars celebrandi* is grounded in his living and proclaiming our Lord's Paschal Mystery. This depth charge of Chrism Mass and Holy Week grace helps us to both die and rise.

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<sup>8</sup> cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965) and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992).

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Fr. Kevin Dyer, SJ, the National Chaplain of FOCUS, for this idea which he expressed at the January 2024 FOCUS SEEK Conference in St. Louis. I have applied his essential insight.

In the world of opera, there is the concept of the “prima donna.” Many of us have experienced a certain liturgical prima donnaism which is completely antithetical to an authentic *ars celebrandi*.

An authentic *ars celebrandi* must be grounded in a death to pride, vanity, a liturgical sense of superiority and self-righteousness and in a rising to humility, sincerity and holiness. Thus, a radiant *ars celebrandi* is connected to a priest’s daily plunging into the Paschal Mystery.

The Catholic priest “plunges” into Our Lord’s Paschal Mystery -- His Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension— as he prays, as he engages in the evangelizing pastoral charity of priestly ministry, and as he worships, celebrating the Mass and the sacraments in a spirit of what Pope Benedict calls “sacramental mysticism.”<sup>10</sup>

Fourth, and lastly, Pope Francis emphasizes that at the heart of a priest’s *ars celebrandi* is his “keen awareness of being, through God’s mercy, a particular presence of the risen Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

Let us focus for a moment on the priest celebrant’s being a *particular presence of the Risen Lord* and its impact on his *ars celebrandi*.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis states: “Christ’s resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated the world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force...Each day in our world beauty is born anew, it rises transformed through the storms of history...Such is the power of the resurrection, and all who evangelize are instruments of that power.”<sup>12</sup>

The priest celebrant of the Catholic Mass is an instrument of the evangelizing power that flows from the Risen Jesus. He is humbly and profoundly aware that he is a unique presence of the Risen Lord.

He is even more aware that when it seems like the Faith is dying and people are falling away from the Faith, that the Risen Lord is at the heart of the Catholic Mass.

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<sup>10</sup> See *Desiderio Desideravi*, 12; *Deus Caritas Est*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Desiderio Desideravi*, 57. See also Pope Benedict’s April 14, 2010, General Audience focused on the *munus docendi* of the Catholic priest, where he states: “Therefore, the priest, who acts in persona Christi Capitis and representing the Lord, never acts in the name of someone who is absent but, rather in the very Person of the Risen Christ, who makes himself present with his truly effective action.”

<sup>12</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 276.

He understands the Paschal Mystery-Salvation History dynamic that the Resurrection seeds of Church reform and creative evangelization are so often planted in the darkest soil and the darkest moments of Church and Salvation history.

The cosmic power of the Catholic Mass celebrated in season and out of season helps us to have faith in these dark moments in the historical and transformational whirlwind of the Paschal Mystery.

In *The Everlasting Man*, G.K. Chesterton captured the victory and hope of our Lord's Resurrection in history. He writes: "Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave."

This Easter and every Easter we celebrate this Everlasting Man who knew his way out of the grave and who is leading the Catholic Church on Long Island to a great Resurrection.