

Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron
Holy Thursday Chrism Mass Homily
Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, Detroit
April 9, 2009
(As transcribed from digital audio recording at liturgy)

“Come down, O love divine, seek thou this soul of mind and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;

O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear, and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;

And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight, and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long, shall far outpass the power of human telling;

For none can guess its grace, till He become the place wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling.”

This Christian poem which I have just recited, and which even more beautifully the choir sang, comes from a fifteenth-century Franciscan Friar Bianco da Siena, and it eloquently captures the mission of Christ’s Holy Spirit. In the world, it is the mission of the Holy Spirit to come down in order to make the wounded creation new. The Sacred Scriptures are the inspired account of what God Himself has given us of the history of what He has done to save his people. And in regard to the Holy Spirit, the Old and the New Testaments time and again tell us how the Lord sent His Holy Spirit to come down, in great power, in order to dwell in those persons and things the Father chose to consecrate as instruments to achieve His purpose. Again and again we hear how the Holy Spirit came down, to give a new shape, a new being to those in whom He would take up His dwelling. Time and again in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came down upon leaders, kings and prophets to shape them into the servants that the people of Israel needed. This coming down upon the seventy elders in the desert, upon King David, upon the prophet Ezekiel, is foreshadowed in the very first verses of the Bible, where we hear how the “*ruha*,” the wind, the

spirit, came down to hover over the chaos so that it would be shaped according to the Word of God.

In the New Testament we hear of the coming down of the Holy Spirit upon Our Lady in order to shape within her womb the God-man, Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles records how, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on the first Christian community to form their hearts according to the pattern of the Lord's own courage and boldness. And of course in the life of our Savior Himself, we see that at His baptism, the Holy Spirit, who belonged to him by right and by virtue of his eternal sonship, came down to suffuse his whole humanity. And, finally, at his Resurrection, the Holy Spirit came down upon His corpse in the Holy Sepulcher in order to consummate Christ's passing over into new and eternal life.

So, as at in the times at which the Sacred Scripture gives us a report, likewise our own day God continues to act in order to save His people. His principal acts are the seven sacraments. And in each of the sacraments, the Holy Spirit comes down upon persons and things of his creation in order to make of them a new creation, a supernatural creation. We see this most clearly in the Holy Eucharist, here at the invocation of the priest and the imposition of his hands, the Holy Spirit comes down upon our humble gifts of bread and wine in order to transform them into the body and blood, soul and divinity of God the Son. Thus, Christ is in our midst, He who is indeed proclaimed, as He told us in the Nazareth Synagogue, the Messiah foretold by Isaiah the prophet, God's own anointed one, on whom the spirit came to rest, so that he could raise up the poor and those who are oppressed.

Recognizing that it is in the sending of the Holy Spirit to come down and reshape our world that God saves us, helps all of us understand that the meaning of the blessing of the oils and the consecration of the sacred chrism that is our work in the liturgy this morning. Through the prayer of the Church and the ministry of the bishop, the Holy Spirit comes down upon this creature of olive oil, and makes it a powerful instrument of salvation.

I would explain the results of these blessings and this consecration in this way: We could understand that in this liturgy, the Holy Spirit comes down on the oil to make it a new creation,

to reshape it and imprint within it the very prayer – the very form of the prayer – of our High Priest, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit imprints in the oil our High Priest's prayer for His catechumens, that they will be fortified for wrestling with and escaping the grip of their sins, the grip of Satan. The Holy Spirit comes down upon the creature oil and imprints within it our High Priest's prayer for the sick, that they will be given a new heart and new courage in order to bear their own personal share in our Savior's cross. And the Holy Spirit descends upon, in great power, the oil for chrism, and imprints upon it our Priest's prayer for those persons and things that He will consecrate to participate in the offering of his paschal sacrifice.

So then, when the Church uses the holy oils and the chrism, what we see is that the persons and things anointed are touched and suffused with the very prayer of Jesus Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is accomplished by the spirit of Jesus, who comes down upon the oils today and who will come down upon those to be anointed with these oils in the year ahead, so that the prayer that lives in the heart and mind of Christ will suffuse those who are touched with these oils. And it is through being touched with this prayer of Christ, it is through these oils used in the celebration of the sacraments, that Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, the Alpha and the Omega, continues to make in this year of grace men and women into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father.

This making, this remaking of olive oil into a new creation at this liturgy, is one of God's marvelous deeds. However, as great as this deed is, it always will remain as incomplete. In order for this coming down of the Holy Spirit upon the oils and chrism to reach its fulfillment, we must let the Spirit come down upon us and fill our souls when we make use of these oils. The prayer of Jesus which is impressed into the oils and chrism, and which is expressed visibly in these sacramentals, must be impressed into us and expressed in us, in our prayers and in our actions. So, let us ask the Holy Spirit to fill us and all our brothers and sisters – all of us members of the Body of Christ – so that the holy oils and chrism which the Spirit makes today will truly be his instruments to renew the face of the earth in the year of grace that lies ahead.

In the words, both the prayers and the directives, in the words and gestures that the sacred liturgy highlights today, the liturgy underscores the central role that the presbyterate of the Archdiocese

of Detroit has in the blessing and consecration of these oils and the chrism. And so I want to take a moment to consider the personal prayer which must live within me and all of us when we priests use these oils in the public prayer, the liturgical worship of the Church. I'd like to make four points in this regard.

First, that the prayer that the Holy Spirit seeks to impress into us and express through us as priests, is a share in the prayer of Christ, the High Priest. Like the oils, we, too, have been shaped by the Holy Spirit into the praying of Jesus. This is the Holy Spirit's work in us. And so we should always understand that our prayer, as private and personal as it may be, is always a share in the prayer that lives and burns in the Sacred Heart, the Priestly Heart, of Christ.

Second, I want to underscore the truth that as intensely personal that the prayer of each of us is, it is never an autonomous act, but is always communal. It is always an act done in communion. We priests, when we pray, are always united and in communion with those we serve; and they always with us. We praying for them, they praying for us. And it is likewise an act of communion among ourselves in the presbyterate, all of us brothers by our prayer mutually sustaining one another in this great service of the priestly people, so that all of our thoughts and actions, all of our efforts, will, as Christ wills, lead to the building up of a people sacred to God, royal and priestly.

Third, I want to remind all of us that our prayer is a great mystery. That it is essential for us to pray, and for this mystery of prayer to become ever deeper and fuller in our lives if we are to attain that virtue, that holiness, that zeal that we have aspired to since we first considered giving ourselves to the priesthood. And as a mystery of grace, let us never forget that our praying is something to be asked for, and not taken for granted. And it is something to be accepted with the firm resolution that we will be faithful to our prayer as participants in the priesthood of Christ.

And lastly, it is within that context that, this year, I invite all of you, my brother priests, once again to renew your commitment, your consecration to the service of Christ and His people. And in all that we say in that consecration let us in particular ask in faith for the gift of a lively prayer, recognizing that in a lively, vibrant, spirit-filled prayer we will receive all the other gifts we need

in order to be good priests and pastors. And let us resolve to accept this gift of prayer, whenever the Holy Spirit will offer it to us, with humility and confidence that this gift will always be given us.

And at the conclusion of that rite, I will speak to all of you who are baptized into Christ and ask for your prayer for your pastors, for your priests. Today, this year, at this liturgy, I especially ask you to beg God to give to your priests the spirit of prayer, a new outpouring of the Spirit of Christ, so that in all things, Jesus *will* be Alpha and Omega, and in all of us we will only be a kingdom and priest for our God.

God bless you.