

Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
Holy Chrism Mass Homily
Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine
April 16, 2014

We call Jesus the Christ which means Jesus the anointed one. The Holy Spirit enables “Him to bring good tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to the oppressed, provide sight to the blind, and proclaim a year that is acceptable to the Lord that is a jubilee.”

This is the program of the Messiah, a program in action and fulfilled in the hearing of his own people at Nazareth. From this moment on in Nazareth, His life will be to care always for the neglected, the marginalized, the sick, the mute, the blind, the excluded ones and most especially the sinners in need of mercy and forgiveness.

The Holy Chrism Mass at the Cathedral takes place to bless the three major oils for God’s people’s sanctification: to baptize and confirm our faithful; to introduce the catechumens into the life of faith; to care of the sick and the dying bringing them comfort and peace to the vulnerable and the frail.

The purpose of the church is to be light to all and to be a sacrament of salvation to many. We do not exist to preserve our institutions but to care for the flock. The oils are so important because they render salvation to our people on their pilgrimage toward the eternal city, the City of God as St. Augustine would say.

There is a liturgical practice of the parish community receiving the oils on the eve of Holy Thursday --these sacred oils blessed, the holy chrism consecrated today at the Cathedral are brought to the parishes-- because the parishes form the network of Eucharistic fellowship linked to the Diocesan bishop.

The strategic plan for the Diocese of St. Augustine has identified three priorities: better communicating the message and life of our Church, to give a greater care to our youth, and the strengthening of our parish life.

Let us today focus on the parish life priority here in the presence of our priests who day in and day out care for our parishes and our schools. The Sacrament of Eucharist is at the heart of our parish life. Nothing is as important as the preparation of our Sunday liturgies, the quality of our preaching, the welcoming of the faithful, the practice of prayer and adoration permeating the entire parish life creating a flow of charity enabling the lay faithful to evangelize, to witness by doing works of mercy in society. The significant annual Eucharistic Congress seeks to enhance a deeper awareness of the mystery of faith and its dynamism in the world permeating secular society with the values of the Gospel, caring for the vulnerable and the needy especially the unborn and the elder.

I admire the generosity of our priests offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation which in this Diocese is made quite available during the seasons of Advent and Lent. Many parishes have increased the opportunity for the reception of the sacrament every week of the year; the proper

reception of Communion motives us to come often to the sacrament of healing and reconciliation. When Catholics who have left the weekly practice of the Eucharist come to their senses and decide to come home to their parishes, this coming home passes first through the experience of Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the name of thousands of sinners, including myself; I thank today the priests who with considerable modesty and patience are the instruments of the Good Shepherd in transmitting the richness of God's mercy, "providing liberty to the oppressed and giving sight to the blind". As Blessed John Paul II often said "true freedom is attained when we walk in the splendor of the truth."

The venerable Father Felix Varela, known in New York as the Apostle of the Irish, who lived his last four years in this city lived here in this parish Cathedral; his room was what it is today, the eastern wing of the Cathedral, was remembered by all as a priest who always visited the sick and the dying. I recently received a letter from a parishioner of Holy Family Parish in Jacksonville, she said "I am under the care of the Community Hospice Center in Jacksonville, my oncologist and my surgeon both agreed that I have 3 to 6 months to live, however, I believe it is all up to God and I am asking him for an extension. Bishop Estevez I am not writing to you about my challenge, I am writing to you on behalf of my fellow Catholics who are in a very tragic and sad situation. If they are "fallen away" from the Church and do not belong to a parish, they will, more than likely, NOT receive the Last Rites when they are dying! If this dying person does not belong to a Catholic Church, he usually will not have a priest respond. This is so upsetting to me and I am sure to him and his family. I realize how bad our shortage of holy priests is but I feel this idea may save souls and by demonstrating this love, compassion and mercy of our Lord, may even bring some families and friends of the deceased, brothers or sisters back to the holy mother church. This letter deeply moved me for Julia understood deeply the precious value of the oil of the sick; she pleaded for the ministry of priests, she reflected the urgency and tragedy of an overlooked group of our Catholic family.

A parish is strong and alive where the sacraments of the faith are truly nurturing the faith of the people of God. The faithful enabled and inspired will make a difference in the city in active stewardship of their time and by apostolates attuned to the creativity of the Holy Spirit, strengthening their marriage, their family life and their civic responsibilities as active citizens.

Blessed is the parish, whose shepherd loves the people and finds joy in self-giving Eucharistic love for them. This ministry of presence needs to be renewed each day at the level of the heart. This presence challenged by the fatigue of the ministry and so many expectations is what matters most in faithful priestly care. Each year at the Chrism Mass the renewal of priestly promises takes place with the union of the body of priests, the bishop and God's people. Then God's people are asked to pray always for their priests. The Bishop who knows of his lowliness, asks also for prayers for him so that reminded by the sign of the ring he wears, he might truly love in sacrificial dedication, this Church, the entire Diocese of St. Augustine. Today I give thanks for the faithful ministry of ten brothers priests who celebrate their jubilee of 25 years and 50 years of priestly service. This family is proud of them and says to them "Ad multos annos!" They are, Fathers Alan Bower, Calonge Lemaine, Jeff McGowan, George Maniangattu, and Rene Robert. And celebrating the golden anniversary: Fathers Joseph Maniangat, Victor Narivelli, Donald Sullivan, Mike Williams and Joseph Zawada.

We are all very fortunate to have all our seminarians present in this liturgy. They're the greatest gift to our priests who will pass on their work to their generous hands. I admire the witness of our Seminarians as disciples of the Lord for the love of the lord in laying down their lives and be ready to be sent for the generous care of God's people especially the poor and the vulnerable. Seminarians, your primary concern must not be the date of your future ordination but rather to focus on how well fit you are to be a worthy minister to Christ's faithful. Formation is first of all auto formation. It is a great satisfaction to me that you look forward to coming back to you Diocese where you belong...where you're urgently needed and where you will manifest the richness of the fruits of God's marvelous work of salvation through your talents and gifts. As the recent successful Bishop's Appeal showed, our lay faithful have really come to our aid so that this local Church is fully equipped to do the mission in all its scope.

I welcome also the many altar servers from all our parishes, boys and girls who come this day as a group, a fraternity, each year to the Chrism Mass, you're very blessed to be servers of the altar in you parishes. The altar represents Christ. That is why we revere it we incense it, we adorn it. It is such a blessing to be so close to the real liturgical action, to grow in knowledge of sacred liturgy, where such beauty is revealed in sacred art and song. I was very privileged to have been an altar server in my teenage years. This service brought me closer to the pastor who became a real friend, Fr. Juan Parelló. I had the privilege to visit him in his late years of retirement in Venezuela where I sensed his pride and satisfaction in seeing me then a priest like him.

The celebration of the Chrism Mass next year is full of momentum and expectation for together we will celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine. A Cathedral renewed in the outside and in the inside! Later, on September 8, 2015 Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston will come as Papal legate sent by the Holy Father Pope Francis to celebrate this great anniversary. His presence will outline the Catholic roots of this great and historic city of St. Augustine, the heroic evangelizing missionary work of the Franciscans in this sacred place where the name of St. Augustine of Hippo is revered and remembered always, where the maternal, tender, sublime intercession of Our Lady of La Leche moves us to be a people of life, a people unceasingly amazed by the beauty of the Mother of God and her child, the Emmanuel, our beloved friend and brother, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Almighty to whom all glory and honor is due forever!

St. Augustine, pray for us, Our Lady of La Leche, pray for us.