



The Homily of Bishop Denis Nulty for Chrism Mass 2021

Introductory remarks:

- While there is an understandable sadness in our priests not being physically present, fraternally supporting one another and hearing the affirmation of their parishioners, family and friends, I want all the priests to know they and their ministry are deeply treasured and appreciated .”
- “Women and men who are the backbone of every parish. On this night I applaud your commitment and dedication to parish ... so many of you roll up your sleeves when a call is made, excelling in the new pandemic ministries of stewarding, social distancing and sanitizing .”
- “We didn’t need a pandemic to tell us the way we minister was already fraying at the edges. Let us not blame everything on Covid-19. Returning to public worship will not be as simple as switching on the lights and opening the church doors .”

Homily

I love the immediacy of Luke’s text this Chrism night. The use of the present tense “is” and those beautiful concluding words “as you listen”. Wherever you are tonight, in your presbytery, in your home, in your religious community, with your family, in your Covid pod, I pray that you hear those words as powerfully as I do this Chrism night.

It's the night we bless oils. Oils that represent the mechanism of every aspect of parish life. Oils for baptism celebrations. Oils for ceremonies of anointing the sick. Oils for confirmation liturgies. Oils for moments of ordination – priest and bishop.

It's the night we renew priestly promises. The night we return to our Ordination Day and remember what was said then and heard by those who were with us, many now gone to their eternal reward. While there is an understandable sadness in our priests not being physically present, fraternally supporting one another and hearing the affirmation of their parishioners, family and friends, I want all the priests to know they and their ministry are deeply treasured and appreciated.

I try my best to text or phone priests on their Ordination dates. Sometimes my call might even remind them of a forgotten anniversary. Yesterday I phoned Father Denis O'Sullivan in Suncroft Nursing Home on the anniversary of his ordination – 68 years ordained in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome. Earlier today I phoned Father Pat O'Brien, Kiltegan – 51 years ordained and Father Eddie Lalor, formerly of Portlaoise – 57 years ordained. On Holy Thursday I will visit our most senior priest, Father Jack O'Leary in Gowran Abbey Nursing Home, who will be 72 years ordained this June.

The face of our presbyterate changes in different ways with every passing year. In the past year we bid a sad farewell to Father Jimmy Doyle in Cooleragh & Staplestown, Father Ned Whelan in Ballon and Father Pat Breen in Raheen, while we warmly welcomed Father Robert from Romania ministering in Naas, Father Theodore from Poland ministering in Portlaoise and Father Yanbo from China ministering at the Cathedral here.

It's the night we gather as a diocesan family. I always associate the parish banners with Chrism night. The one who gets to wear the parish jersey that night is privileged to carry the banner in the entrance procession. Women and men who are the backbone of every parish. On this night I applaud your commitment and dedication to parish, a dedication that is rooted in understanding and living your baptismal calling. So many of you roll up your sleeves when a call is made, excelling in the new pandemic ministries of stewarding, social distancing and sanitizing.

This past twelve months has changed the face of parish for all of us. All our churches have

been closed for public worship for seven out of the past twelve months and some parishes have suffered even longer lockdowns because of local restrictions. While our celebration of the Mass, which is central to our faith as priests and people has been offered behind closed doors, the parish doors have remained wide open bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives and to the blind new sight. While our parish outreach is nourished very much by the Eucharist, it's mandate is missioned by our baptism. That moment we were anointed with the oil of catechumens and chrism.

On Chrism night it is good for us to ask what we understand by parish now and what will it be like in the future? Some might say it is still too early to consider the implications of the pandemic for parish life. We all accept the virtual has redrawn parish boundaries. The virtual has dried up the stream, has flattened the ditch, and much closer to home, has crossed the bridge! We didn't need a pandemic to tell us the way we minister was already fraying at the edges. Let us not blame everything on Covid-19. Returning to public worship will not be as simple as switching on the lights and opening the church doors. We must reflect on how we celebrate Mass and when we celebrate Mass. Maybe we had too many Masses for a Mass going population that was instinctively already socially distancing in churches? Maybe we need to collaborate closer with neighbouring parishes coordinating schedules and times? Maybe we have to reflect on how we celebrate, asking ourselves are we allowing all the elements to speak? This is the work of the immediacy of Luke's text this Chrism night.

It reminds us we are re-visioning the post pandemic parish as we speak. And this is only a start. The oils that are blessed today reassure us we are never abandoned, we are never on our own. Our sacred signs and gestures are grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus. It's not our work, it's His work. We are merely instruments in His hands, all of us anointed at baptism and confirmation; more of us anointed at ordination. Let the oils speak. Let us be signs of hope in a world that needs such hope. And let us be brave not simply to pander to an understandable hunger by some – simply to receive Christ's body without actually becoming His body. Transforming our parishes, all 56 of them to be His body where every person in the parish has a voice and every person is heard. This is synodality at its best and we look forward to travelling where it brings us as parishes and diocese over the coming months and years.

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