



# BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND & WALES

CHRISM MASS : LENT 2011

HOMILY BY ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS

Westminster Cathedral, 19 April

**“At this Chrism Mass today, we celebrate the sacramental life of the Church. In blessing these oils we confidently ask God to renew for us these fountains of grace. This is a joyful Mass, full of thanksgiving.**

“At this Mass the Sacrament of Holy Orders is very much in our thoughts and prayers. We thank God for this gift, particularly the gift of the ordained priesthood. So often our priests are providers. Today we pray together that they are also recipients, receiving the grace of renewed dedication and enthusiasm as they renew their promises of ordination.

“Our joy this morning is not naive optimism. We know that these riches of the Church are contained in earthenware vessels and do not remove from us all difficulty or stress. We are to have our wits about us, planning for the future as well as living in the present. So our celebration has a realism about it, and it contains the Lord’s instructions as to how we are to live our daily lives.

“For me that lesson is summed up in the phrase from the first reading which reminds us all that, as a people and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are named ‘priests of the Lord’. It is as a priestly people that we are to receive and live the gifts of grace.

“This was the message to us of Pope Benedict XVI, given here in this Cathedral: ‘Let us pray that the Catholics of this land will become ever more conscious of their dignity as a priestly people, called to consecrate the world to God through lives of faith and holiness.’ (18 September 2010). We do this as the baptised, sharing in the ministry of Christ himself, who came that the world might be brought into the holiness and fullness of God. Through our identity and unity with Christ, our minds and hearts are to be filled with this intention: my task, in this world, is to consecrate it, make it holy, by my daily actions and my daily prayer. A priestly people is made up of those who consciously unite their efforts to Christ that they may become part of his offering to our heavenly Father. Even our frustrations and failures, our conflicts and our suffering, even our dying, are not excluded for Christ has the power to transform all we place before him into a worthy offering to his Father for the salvation of the world.

“The character of this priestly people is laid down for us in the sacramental life of the Church, particularly in the use of Chrism. The prayer of consecration delineates this character: born again in the waters of baptism, through which our human nature is bound to Christ’s; washed clean of the evil inherited from Adam, a washing in the blood flowing from the side of Christ himself; anointed to be temples of God’s glory, clothed with incorruption in the image of the Alpha and Omega; marked now with royal priestly, and prophetic honour. This is our portrait: a priestly people called to consecrate the world to God.

“The vocation of the ordained priest is to serve this cause – the cause of a priestly people – to feed, guide, nurture and sustain this people who are God’s chosen instruments in our world today, who share in the High Priesthood of Christ through the holiness of their lives.

“Today we priests seek to renew our dedication to this calling, and I suggest that in doing so we have three particular aspects of our priestly ministry to our people in mind: the call to be a people of prayer, the call to offer and experience the forgiveness of sins and the call to express that faith in practical charity.

“Holiness comes from contact with God. He is the fountain of all holiness. Holiness cannot be attained elsewhere.

“The holiness of God is the sole source of the forgiveness of our sins. In the Old Covenant of the Exodus, contact with God for the forgiveness of sins came about through the sprinkling of the blood of the sin offering onto the very Holy of Holies at the heart of the Temple.

In the New Covenant that bond between God and his creation is now embodied in Christ and it is the shedding of his Precious Blood which frees us from our sins. Through this forgiveness we are made and restored as a priestly people.

“We priests serve this holiness in a special way through the Sacrament of Penance. The guilt of the sin of each and all of us should not stay in the soul, poisoning it from within, slowly eroding this priestly character of our lives. Sin must be confessed. Through this Sacrament of Penance sin is placed within Christ’s purifying love. This is our privilege as priests. And it has mutual benefit, for both penitent and priest. We priests learn so much from the time we spend in the confessional. As Pope Benedict said recently:

“‘The administration of the Sacrament of Penance has a very strong appeal to each priest for knowledge of his own identity. We priests are never able to hear the confession of our brothers and sisters solely by virtue of our humanity. If they approach us, it is only because we are priests, configured to Christ the Eternal High Priest and enable to act in his name and in his person, to make God who forgives, renews and transforms, truly present. The celebration of the Sacrament of Penance has a pedagogical value for the priest, as regards his faith, as well as the truth and poverty of his person, and it nourishes within him an awareness of his sacramental identity.’ (25 March 2011)

“So we do well to allow enough room for the exercise of the ministry of Penance and to seek ways of renewing its practice within our parishes and in our own lives too.

“A priestly people also expresses itself in practical charity. This is of such importance and I thank all the priests and people present here today for efforts in reaching out to the needs of those around you. In the months to come we wish to strengthen this work and bring it extra support and encouragement. This is an expression of the depth of good will there is among us for the project of building a society of greater social responsibility, in accordance with Catholic teaching. This effort can properly bring great benefit to the quality of life we share in this country. We are ready for our part in it. Yet the project comes in the context of real financial hardship. Care and action are needed that the necessary financial stringency does not undermine this important social renewal, especially among charities and the voluntary sector.

“At the very heart of our priestly character is our life of prayer. This is the first duty of a priestly people and we priests are also among the most important teachers of the practice of prayer. I recently heard this accolade of a priest in the diocese: ‘He is wonderful; he has taught us how to pray again.’ What better praise could there be for a priest! After all, this was the very request made of the Lord himself by his disciples: ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’ May today be a reminder to us of our privilege and duty of leading our people in the practice of prayer.

“Many can help in this, of course. The first and best teachers of prayer are parents. They may well need our encouragement and help especially in patterns of family prayers. Today, many initiatives in prayer are available, from the simple steps and publications, to the role of prayer guides, groups and retreats.

“But we priests have particular responsibilities for the promotion and quality of the public prayers of our people, in devotions and in liturgy. Please do see how your church can become more consistently a house of prayer, and your parish a school of prayer. May we always remember the wonderful words of St Augustine about prayer always centred on Christ: ‘He prays for us as our priest; he prays in us as our head; he is prayed to, by us, as our God.’ Can we not establish and deepen a time of silence before Mass begins? Can we not lead people in periods of prayerful silence during the celebration of Mass, too? Such silence is more than the absence of sound. Prayerful silence is not broken by the crying of a child or a fit of coughing. But prayerful silence is an essential part of our consecrating the world to God, day by day.

“In the Gospel this morning we have heard how all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus. This is not to happen to us. You and I, as priests, are never to be at the centre of the celebration of the Mass or of the pattern of prayer. We should not put ourselves under that pressure. Only the Lord can occupy that place. Today, as we renew our dedication let us strive afresh to be transparent to Christ, to let him show through our words and deeds, so that others may be drawn to him, and to him alone.

“As Pope Benedict said, again in this Cathedral, ‘I invite you once more to look to Christ who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection (Heb 12.2) I ask you to unite yourselves ever more fully to the Lord, sharing in his sacrifice on the Cross and offering him that ‘spiritual worship’ (Roms 12.1) which embraces every aspect of our lives....and in doing so may you join...in building a society truly worthy of man, worthy of your nations’ highest traditions.’

“With these words I now invite all our priests to renew their commitment to priestly service.”

+ **Vincent Nichols**

**Archbishop of Westminster**  
**President, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales**