



## DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



### Homily for the Chrism Mass St. Patrick Cathedral April 19, 2011

Today as we gather as the Lord's family here in our Diocese of Fort Worth in this Chrism Mass, we are called to bless the Oils which will be used in so many Sacramental celebrations in the year ahead; and to recall how these oils teach us that we are truly bound and held together by the presence of the Lord Himself, and in our lives and the life of the Church. In the central point for this Mass, the priests of our Diocese will renew their commitment they made on ordination day, to give their lives to the Lord and to priestly ministry: a ministry which is never functional, but essential and life giving to all who come our way. I believe above all, it is a day to recognize, give thanks and encourage the priests of the Diocese who daily pour themselves out on behalf of so many across the vast expanse of our local Church.

As I was reflecting on the readings for today, readings which we hear every year, I was also speaking to one of my classmates at about the time I read the words "Faithful witness" and "forever I will sing the Goodness of the Lord." Our conversation turned to a priest who had been a witness to us in the early years of our ministry. His name was Father Chester Fabisiak, a Jesuit from the Warsaw province of the Society of Jesus. He had lead quite a life, and his later years found him at Blessed Sacrament in Springfield, Illinois, where he had a profound impact on a number of us who were stationed with him as we were growing in our own priestly identity and ministry. All priests present at this Mass today - myself included are here as priests because of the faithful witness of a priest to us. That is our call now to continue that life of witness. I may have spoken about Chester with some of you, but I would like to briefly, on this day of priestly recommitment, to reflect what he taught me, and what he taught all who came his way.

My first years at this parish were an adjustment, as I had just returned from Rome, and this was my first parish experience, my first pastoral assignment. And, there were some challenges for me. In the evening, I used to visit with Chester in his rooms at the Rectory and I can say honestly now that I probably complained to him about a number of things. That is, until I found out what his first years of ministry were like. I asked him where he had been assigned, and he told me that it was in Dachau, in the concentration camp! He was ordained in June of 1939, and in September of 1939 Hitler invaded Poland, and Chester was arrested along with number of other Jesuits and religious. He was sent to Dachau, and remained there until 1945, when the allies came to Dachau, and the American soldiers prayed the Lord's Prayer with all the remaining survivors. From the moment he told me where he had been his first five years of priestly ministry, believe me, I never complained again.

During his years there, he related several incidents to me. For example, he said that one Christmas eve,

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after they had celebrated Mass in secret, with the bare essentials; they went into separate corners of the barracks -- just a few together. There they exchanged gifts: the gift was a word of encouragement to each other! On another occasion, Chester was before a firing squad, on another occasion, he told me, that some of his priest friends refused to bury some of the Jewish residents alive, so the priests in turn were buried alive! What sustained Chester through the darkness of all of this was what I would call his uncomplicated Faith that indeed the Lord was with him. And, his life showed me that even in Dachau and after he left there, he carried with him a spirit of gratitude.

After the war Chester was sent as a missionary to Argentina where he became a friend of Evita Peron. He could speak Spanish better than English and taught me my first words in Spanish. He also, at one point, when he was home visiting his many nieces and nephews in Poland, gave advice to Lech Walensa. Later on, somehow, he ended up in Springfield, Illinois, where he taught eighth grade religion in the parish grade school for many years, and truly related to the eighth grade classes in every way. The last class he taught there had a mural painted of him on one of the walls of the parish school which is there to this day. These students, now adults, speak of how Father Chester impacted their lives and faith. Chester also visited the hospitals and had a ministry to the elderly in two high rise apartment buildings, and would you believe it, had a ministry to prostitutes as well. His oils were always with him, and these, and his priestly ministry brought us all together in the community of Faith. He died suddenly on December 9, 1995. He had a great devotion to the Blessed Mother and died on her feast day....in a year in which her feast day had been transferred to Monday!

On this day of the Chrism Mass, I believe that Father Chester still teaches me, and gives me again the better perspective in life and faith and priestly ministry that I sometimes truly need, and I believe the wider community needs as well.

Fr. Chester's witness teaches me that gratitude is an essential part of our life and that we need to live each day with a spirit of it. Gratitude for the gift of the priesthood and for the priests of our Diocese. I would hope that our people would take a moment to express that to our priests as well. I would also ask you to join with our vocation director and priests to understand and encourage vocations to the priesthood -- be it religious or diocesan. It is not just a matter left to the vocation director, but a work of the entire Diocese. We have a significant increase in the number of our seminarians, but this prayer and work must continue.

That Fr. Chester could live this gift of gratitude in the midst of darkness is a reminder to me that in these days that sometimes challenge, that priestly ministry is a light in the darkness for so many that have lost their way and seek God again. The holy oils which Chester carried with him and which brought so many together, teach and remind me of this: that in their Sacramental ministry which is bound up with the lives of priests, they too, can bring and keep many people together in their Faith lives and in an age in which God often seems far away, or unnecessary. Part of our calling is like that of Fr. Chester, that a priest, acting in

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persona Christi, is a focal point for a spirituality of communion of faith for many groups and people who already live in a fractured and polarized world and at times, ecclesial environment.

The gift of encouragement that the priests in Dachau gave each other as a gift is a gift that we can give each other in daily life and ministry.

And what I call the witness of Chester's uncomplicated Faith is a witness to each of us to remember that as we are configured to Christ in our Ordination, it is indeed He who leads us and calls us and never abandons us. Fr. Chester knew that and lived that in all of the years of his priestly life and ministry. That is why his life as a priest carried with it 1) gratitude, 2) an uncomplicated Faith, a acknowledgement that it was the Lord who was guiding him and thus a spirit of humility 3) and why he could offer a word of encouragement to all, even in Dachau years ago.

The priests today are once again sent to proclaim and undertake the same tasks that Isaiah did. Pope John Paul II once said that "In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and the person of Christ the head and shepherd."

+ Bishop Kevin Vann

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