

Homily given at the Mass of Chrism

Thursday 8 April 2004

by **The Most Reverend Kevin McDonald, BA, STL, STD,**
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I welcome everyone here today to this important celebration in the life of the diocese and my first Chrism Mass as bishop of the diocese. Today we bless the oils that will be used in the coming year for celebration of the sacraments and today also our priests renew their priestly commitment. For all of us, this liturgy is a special time of looking back and looking forward. We look back to the roots and origins of the Church and of the Eucharist. We also look back in our own lives to embrace again the grace of our own baptism and confirmation and, in the case of priests and deacons, of our ordination. It is also a time for looking forward in hope to continuing life and ministry within our diocese, symbolised and focussed in the blessing of the oils. And, of course, we do this in the context of the celebration of the Eucharist, which is itself a memorial, and just before the triduum, the *remembering* of the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is a season when our minds, memories and imagination need to be fully engaged by the liturgy we celebrate.

We come together today in freedom, conscious that there are parts of the world where Catholics cannot come together in the freedom we enjoy here. We are free to assemble, free to worship. We also come together in faith. Without faith this celebration has no sense. But we come together from a society where many are uneasy with people of faith and where it doesn't take much – something like the Mel Gibson film of the Passion – to bring about anger about the persistence and the growth of the Church. And there is life and growth here in this local Church. As a newcomer it perhaps strikes me more forcibly. We can too easily become fixated on the problems in a way that makes the fruit and the life less obvious than they should be.

This Mass is a celebration, therefore, of our identity and of our faith. And there is a particular focus on priesthood and on the Eucharist, the centre, the heart of the life of the Church. The Eucharist is the means whereby the Church continues to live and to flourish in every age and every generation. In the Pope's letter to priests for Maundy Thursday this year, he dwells on the

inextricable connectedness of Church, Eucharist, and Priesthood. And it's in that context that he speaks very passionately about vocations and the need to nurture and encourage vocations.

As members of the Church in this generation, our faith in Jesus Christ is not an opinion or a view that is susceptible to change or cancellation. It is a commitment which engages us in a fundamental way and which defines us and defines our future. This is how it has been in the Church throughout the ages. This is the context in which to understand the renewal of priestly commitment. The idea of a life-long commitment is alien to contemporary habits of mind and habits of living. I was very moved in my last diocese when a prominent layman, Charles Whitehead said publicly that he would continue to do the work he was doing for the rest of his life because that is what he was called to do. As priests *we* make an act of faith in God, in God's will and in our future. We make a commitment with which all subsequent decisions must be consistent, which all subsequent decisions must deepen and ratify. In responding to the call to priesthood, we are claimed, claimed at the centre of our being, we are configured to Our Lord and claimed by Him.

"The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me", as we heard in today's reading. At ordination we are anointed, but anointed so that we may anoint others, we're blessed so that we may be a blessing to others and that grace is renewed every day through our ministry to those entrusted to our care. They are our treasure. They are the people of Christ consigned to us: As we heard in last Sunday's readings: "*each day* he provides me with speech, he wakes me to listen so that I can make a reply to the weary" and this even when we're weary ourselves. And our life is truly blessed: it is blessed by the unique and special intimacy between the priest and his people that characterises the Catholic priesthood and the Catholic Church.

And this brings us to another aspect of priesthood summed up in the words: "He has *sent* me to bring good news to the poor": another aspect of the reality and, indeed, the mystery of

priesthood. I myself have had the experience several times in the last decade of being sent, suddenly, unexpectedly to minister in new and unknown situations. There is a rather frightening freedom in that but it is precious freedom as well as a costly one. I always think that it is the aspect of priestly life which is most at odds with the pattern of thinking and living of the culture in which we live. It seems to clash exactly with the spirit that is expressed in the phrase “the right to choose”, which sadly has become part of the language of a culture of death and of self. The point is that we have *been* chosen. Work for vocations for priesthood and religious life is crucially a matter of inviting people to engage with the question of whether they have *been* chosen for *this* life. We give ourselves in freedom and in faith and draw life from the situations and the people that are given to us. The mystery of priesthood is something we live every day and which we embrace each day: we put our faith in the one who calls us, anoints us and sends us and that gives meaning to the whole of our lives. Our time of prayer is the time when we explicitly engage the relationship with the

Lord who chooses us and sends us, and it is that time – which crucially includes our celebration of Mass – which gives sense and direction to all the rest of our lives, especially to the moments when we’re a bit lost, or overburdened, or unsure of the value of what we do or of the priorities we should pursue. Prayer yields new insight and new hope. We should experience a desire to pray and to *return* to prayer: it always *is* a return because we do wander in our minds from our condition of being chosen and anointed and sent. We can even resent it, but there is healing for that resentment – it is to be found in intimacy with the Lord, in our prayer and especially in this celebration today where we welcome the Lord truly present, and we give ourselves afresh to him and to his people.

All of us here today, every one of us, all God’s people, are called to a unique role in God’s purpose; let our return to this Cathedral and to this Chrism Mass be a return, heart and mind, to Our Lord and to his service and may he bless us and our diocese, in the year ahead.