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**ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF PETERBOROUGH**

**HOMILY: Chrism Mass**

**DATE: 2019**

Dear friends in Christ, we all know the expression “running on empty.” It comes to us from the world of driving and quite literally refers to a gas tank that is practically dry, a car that is running on fumes and a driver who is just praying to make it to the next service station. Now we use that phrase in a popular sense to refer to any situation where we find ourselves spent, exhausted, with nothing left to give.

The annual Chrism Mass is meant to address the “running on empty” problem in two ways, literally and figuratively. Literally, the sacred oils blessed at last year’s Chrism Mass are just about used up. The stocks are dwindling - those oils used for Baptism, Confirmation, anointing of the sick, and Ordination may be down to the last few drops. So, I will bless new oils tonight at this Mass: oil of the sick, oil of catechumens and sacred chrism - and they will be given to the priests. It’s not only a matter of restocking supplies, though that is part of it. As the priests take those oils back to their parishes it is a powerful symbol of their union with the Bishop. Their priestly ministry is part of a larger Diocesan Church and part of the Church universal.

And that leads us to the figurative sense. For the Chrism Mass is fundamentally about the priesthood; the gift of priestly service within the Church. Every priest now and then feels like he is running on empty. And that’s not surprising. Every priest, like Jesus in tonight’s gospel, is sent to proclaim good news. A priest receives the Lord’s spirit to announce liberty to the captives, new sight to the blind, to proclaim God’s love and favour. It is natural that a priest might start to feel a little dry if he is giving of himself fully in the mission of preaching, celebrating the sacraments and leading the people of God. That is a good kind of emptiness, a tiredness brought on by the faithful living of his vocation. He still needs to be filled, and he will be - through prayer, his own reception of the sacraments, in good friendships and through his constant rededication to the promises he made on the day of his Ordination. That is why, during this Chrism Mass, the priests will renew those priestly promises to serve, and that is why they will seek the help of your prayer as well, upon which we always rely.

These days, however, it seems like some in the Church – priests, laity, religious – are running on empty and not in a good way. It's the kind of emptiness that is brought on by shame, humiliation and anger - that is the fruit of recent months where revelations about clergy sexual abuse and institutional failure have rocked the Church yet again. Most of the revelations date from the past – and in Canada our history too includes dealing with this – but the impacts are felt in the present: first and foremost, for victims and their families who bear deep scars and are often deprived of faith because of such abuse. The faithful are often bewildered and angry, perhaps even having to justify to themselves and others why they remain faithful. Let it be said that priests too have carried this burden of recent months, often feeling guilt by association, anger at brother priests and bishops who have failed so seriously, wondering if their parishioners are looking at them with suspicion. This is a very different kind of emptiness and a dangerous one because it leaves us deprived of hope. And to be people of faith, we must always claim the virtue of hope.

Tonight, we need to hear again the good news that Jesus came to announce to the poor: and to remember that every crisis in the Church is also an opening for God's grace to bring about transformation and renewal. With a spirit of prayer, trust and openness to God we can always find the way forward. The paschal mystery that we celebrate throughout this week proclaims that God has the power to bring light from darkness, healing from pain, and life out of death.

With that lens of faith, we know that the current travails don't tell the whole story. Indeed, none of us would be here tonight to celebrate the priesthood and pray for priests if that were the whole story. Like you, I still find hope and encouragement in the priesthood and in priests. Good news never gets much attention and that's as it should be: goodness in the priesthood shouldn't be newsworthy, it should be the norm! But as the bad news has been featured in recent months, perhaps we could take a moment tonight for the positive as well. I will do that by referring to the good works of some priests while leaving out specific names. Before doing so though, it is important to note that while I am highlighting a few stories, I could tell positive stories about every priest in our Diocese and I hope every priest here knows how much I appreciate their ministry. But I must limit myself to a few illustrations.

I could mention a senior priest who took on every extra assignment a bishop ever gave him: who handled tough jobs, in addition to pastoring large parishes and mentoring a whole generation of priests, and who now is heading into retirement. I won't say his name, because he would not like it. He is humble and he did none of it for personal glory - only out of a desire to serve the Lord and his Church.

I might speak of a man who recently revived a defunct priests' hockey team, a kind of clerical Harlem Globetrotters: a team with a long history of entertaining families through wholesome (slightly corny) fun and promoting vocations in the process. And it is now reborn. I won't mention his name, but you can google it - and you will read a very positive story.

I could mention 2 priests who went to Panama this January, not for a beach vacation, but for World Youth Day. Instead of sipping margheritas, they corralled eighty young people and brought them to see Pope Francis - with all the challenges and logistics that involved. I won't utter their names. They did it for the young people, not my accolades.

Or what about the seven or eight priests who carried on in this difficult year made more difficult for them because of health problems: including bad knees, sore joints, hearing and vision loss, heart, respiratory and circulatory problems. They dealt with those things on the job or maybe they took a little break and came back. But they endured, out of a commitment to serving God and the Church. I won't mention their names. It would violate confidentiality, for one thing! Yet these are men who have carried the cross and have prevailed despite hardships.

What about the 31 priests (I think I counted right) who have left their own country to serve the Church here in the Diocese of Peterborough. They have left loved ones, often in distant lands. They have come here and have had to adapt to our climate, our way of doing things, and our weird accents. They have enriched our Church with their experiences. I can't mention them by name; it's a long list. They don't want credit; they simply desire to serve the people of God.

For that matter, I know 55 priests who, in the last year have preached numerous homilies, celebrated the sacraments, visited schools, attended the sick and the dying, have counselled married couples, have fretted over budgets and boilers, and have strived to live with faithfulness and love the calling that is theirs. I won't name them. Because you know who they are, and you see them here tonight. They are the ones who give me encouragement and new hope, as I know they give to you. And if they feel at times like they are running on empty, they trust that God can renew and strengthen them. So, they commit themselves anew to priestly service tonight.

Above all, we as priests must model ourselves on Jesus Christ the great high priest. Christ has conferred upon his priests the mission to proclaim and teach, to baptize and to heal and to do so in his name. And he promises help in abundance so that we might fulfill that task, Christ's mission given to the Church. Whenever as priests we feel that we are running on empty, the Lord's grace can fill us up. The power of the Sacraments can invigorate us. The words of the Gospel can inspire us once again. And the prayers, friendship and support of the people of God can lift us up as on eagle's wings. That is the priesthood that we gather to celebrate tonight. That is the priesthood that the Lord bestowed as a gift to his Church.