

**Homily by Most Rev Dr Philip Boyce, OCD**

**Bishop of Raphoe**

**Holy Thursday. Chrism Mass. 2016**

To you my Brothers in the Priesthood of Christ I address these words at this solemn hour in the Church's liturgical calendar. It is Holy Thursday morning and you are gathered around your Bishop in a visible sign of unity and discipleship. You will renew your priestly promises and concelebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The Chrism will be consecrated, and the holy oils of catechumens and of the sick will be blessed. As priests you will use these oils in the administration of the Sacraments during the year that lies ahead. You are here, representing every parish in the Diocese, as witnesses and co-workers with your Bishop because you share (as the Vatican Council stated) "in the sacred office of the Bishop in building up, sanctifying and ruling the people of God" (*Pres.Ord.* 2).

We must also remember that we celebrate a Jubilee Year of Mercy and that we as priests are the visible channels of divine mercy for God's people. The God who anointed us to be his priests is a God of mercy "Mercy is his Name" (cf. *Mis. Vultus* 1-2). God the Father, as St. Paul writes, is "rich in mercy" (Eph.2: 4). To Moses he revealed himself as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6) "He does not treat us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy towards those who fear him" (Ps. 103: 10-11). It is remarkable how this Jubilee Year has made us more conscious of how often God's mercy is mentioned in Sacred Scripture and in liturgical texts.

At the Mass we celebrate every day, it appears repeatedly: "May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins..." then we have the Kyrie, and in the Gloria the words: ". You take away the sins of the world have mercy on us". In the First Eucharistic Prayer, we say: "To us also your servants, who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies..." We also pray for our departed brothers and sisters "who have died in your mercy". And in one of the ancient Collects we pray: "O God, who reveal your power above all in your mercy and forgiveness ..." (26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time).

God's mercy then is not a sign of his weakness but (as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches) "a sign of his omnipotence" (Cf. S.T. II-II, q.30, a.4).

The words of the prophet Isaiah are read at this Chrism Mass every year: "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, because the Lord has anointed me...He has sent

me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those bound in prison; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Is 61:1-2 ). Every priest is reminded by these words of an essential aspect of his ministry. In the Confessional, when celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he is a living instrument of God's pardon and forgiveness. Through his attitude and his words, the penitent should make the experience of God's goodness and mercy. The good confessor will not be a man of either severity or laxity. St. John Paul II wrote: "Severity crushes people and drives them away. Laxity is misleading and deceptive".

Failure to call a sin a sin is not true compassion and mercy. On the other hand, however, no matter how grave a sin may be or how overwhelming the sense of guilt may be in a penitent's heart, mercy and forgiveness are never wanting if there is true repentance. The sin has to be named and confessed to the priest who represents God. That is liberating, for as Pope Francis often reminds us: "When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fulness of mercy and there is no sin too terrible to be forgiven".

Recent Popes have all emphasised the urgency and power of God's mercy: Pope Paul VI declared that the Church "has an endless desire to show mercy" (*Evangelium Gaudium*, 24); Pope John Paul II wrote a special Encyclical Letter on God's mercy and acknowledged the life and message of Sr. Faustina: "The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the creator and of the Redeemer - and when she brings people close to the sources of the Saviour's mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 15) it is in a special way the solitary figure of the priest confessor who is the instrument of God's mercy and forgiveness to the troubled heart and repentant sinner. I thank all of you who faithfully administer this Sacrament of Mercy throughout the year. How helpless we would be if we did not have the assurance of God's sacramental pardon of our sins.

As Pope Francis said recently to a group of confessors in Rome: "Every penitent member of the faithful, after the priest's absolution, has the certainty, through faith, that his sins are no more. They no longer exist! God is omnipotent." And then with a smile, he added: "I like to think that God has one weakness, namely, a bad memory. Once He has forgiven you, he forgets. And this is great! The sins are no more; they have been wiped away by divine mercy. Every absolution is, in a certain way, a jubilee of the heart, which brings joy not only to the faithful and the Church, but first of all to God himself, Jesus said so: "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need nor repentance" (Lk.15:7). It is important, therefore, that the confessor be also a "channel of joy" and that the faithful, after being pardoned, no longer feel the oppression of guilt, but that he or she can relish God's work, who has freed them, to live in thanksgiving ready to repair the evil committed and to go meet their brothers and sisters with a good and willing heart" (4 march 2016).

The good confessor can lead the penitent to an experience of God's mercy and to a renewal of hope and peace. However, the priest himself has to experience God's mercy, as someone put it, "on both sides of the grille", namely, as a priest who absolves but also as a penitent who receives absolution for his own sins and failures. He has to go regularly to confession himself. We are all sinners and in need of God's pardon. The Confiteor has to be said by everyone.

The Church urges us priests not to neglect this Sacrament in our own lives: "Even in order to be a good and effective minister of Penance, the priest needs to have recourse to the source of grace and holiness present in this Sacrament. We priests, on the basis of our personal experience, can certainly say that, the more careful we are to receive the Sacrament of Penance and to approach it frequently and with good dispositions, the better we fulfil our own ministry as confessors and ensure that our penitents benefit from it. And on the other hand this ministry would lose much of its effectiveness if in some way we were to stop being good penitents" (John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. 31, VI).

I thank all you, dear people, for coming to the Cathedral this morning for the Chrism Mass in order to be with and to accompany the priests of the Diocese. I thank you for the co-operation and support you give to your priests. Do continue to pray for them and for the gift of good vocations to meet all the spiritual needs of our parishes. May these coming days of Holy Week be ones of grace and holiness for you all.

I pray that this year be for all of us a renewed personal experience of God's mercy and forgiveness. May Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, who penetrated this mystery more than anyone else, help us to accept it ourselves and lead others to know its liberating power. Amen.