

*Chrism Mass Homily - St Eunan's Cathedral, Letterkenny*  
*2 April 2026*

It's a great privilege for me to be present here today as a priest again of the Diocese of Raphoe, as the new bishop gathered with the presbyters and many representatives of the lay faithful and Religious of the diocese for the first time to celebrate the Chrism Mass.

Because of the nature of this celebration, not least in relation to the renewal of priestly promises, some of my comments now will be directed to the priests but will hopefully have a resonance for all present.

If you have ever crossed the Atlantic, you may have smiled - perhaps winced - at American humour about Irish cooking which many Americans knew well because of their Irish grandmothers: food boiled to death they would joke! Some even jest that in hell, the Irish will do the cooking, to complete the punishment. A sense of humour is required by us Irish in the face of such provocation!

And yes, we might admit: the "traditional salad" of my childhood, and maybe for many still today (who knows?) would do little to dissuade that American impression – dried up lettuce, a tired tomato, a hard-boiled egg and a stubborn dollop of salad cream. No oil. No sheen. No life.

But things have changed you may well respond. Surely, over more recent generations we have learned something of flavour, of richness, of the quiet glory of olive oil.

Travel through the Mediterranean region and you will understand. There, the olive tree endures - ancient, patient, shimmering in the light. Field after field, silver-green, strong yet supple. From it comes the oil of gladness, the oil that makes the face shine, as the Psalmist sings.

And yet, just now, some of those same lands are deeply troubled. Olive groves which have stood for centuries in the Holy Land and Lebanon now lie in the shadow of brutal conflict. The earth that yields oil of a different type (better known as petroleum) also trembles under the weight of war (think of the Strait of Hormuz). Oil so vital to the life of nations - has become a source of anxiety, of rising costs, of uncertain futures. What once spoke simply of abundance now reminds us how fragile peace and prosperity can be, how interwoven the life of the world truly is.

Today, we stand in a long living tradition. With generations before us in Raphoe - bishops, priests, Religious, faithful - we bless oil and consecrate chrism: olive oil mingled with balsam, fragrant and set apart. Oil for the year ahead. Oil for the sacraments. Oil for the life of the Church.

And the Gospel draws us deeper still. Christ stands and declares: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me." Not with oil seen by the eye, but with the invisible, living anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Oil runs like a hidden thread through all of Scripture. Jacob pours it upon the stone at Bethel. The Good Samaritan bends low and pours oil and wine into wounded flesh. The Psalmist rejoices: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup is overflowing."

All these anointings find their fulfilment in Christ, the Alpha and the Omega - and from him, they flow to us.

This is what today's Chrism Mass proclaims with quiet power: that what was his has become ours. Through the sacraments, the life of Christ - his mission, his suffering and death, his resurrection - flows into us like oil poured out, not sparingly, but abundantly.

Every Catholic is anointed through the ministry of the priest and bishop. In baptism the first touch of that sacred oil. In confirmation, its strengthening seal. In sickness, its healing tenderness. In ordination, its consecrating fire upon the hands of the priest.

Yes - the Catholic "salad," if you will, is never to be dry. It is richly, gloriously anointed.

But oil in all its different manifestations - think also of the ever-useful WD-40 variety - at home, on the farm, in factories is never idle. It soothes. It strengthens. It heals. It loosens what has grown stiff. It quiets what grinds and strains. It brings movement where there was resistance, life where there was friction.

So too the Holy Spirit - the true Oil of God. As St Irenaeus reminds us: the Father anoints, the Son is anointed and the anointing itself is the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit at baptism makes of us a people anointed - a royal people, a priestly people, a prophetic people. And from among us, some are called to the ministerial priesthood: not apart from the anointing, but for its service.

The Spirit anoints us so that we in turn may anoint others. He fills us so that we may overflow in sharing God's grace and blessing.

And perhaps never more than now do we sense how much the world needs that anointing. In a time of war and fear, of fragile economies and anxious households when the price of oil (the petroleum kind) can unsettle nations, hearts too can grow tight, weary, uncertain. The human spirit, like dry ground, begins to crack.

Without this anointing, the Christian life becomes thin, mechanical - a duty without delight, a journey without fire. And priesthood itself risks becoming what Pope Francis warned against: 'function without unction'.

But where the Spirit is, there is fragrance. There is movement. There is sheen. There is joy. There is mission.

Today, then, we pray for a deeper awareness of this anointing - baptismal and priestly alike. That it may not remain merely an idea but become a living certainty within us.

So that in our preaching, dear brothers, there is engagement and fire. In our sacraments celebrated, there is conviction and tenderness. In our ministry to all, especially the poor and marginalised, there is compassion and assistance. In our daily lives - whether in family, in work, in quiet acts of care - there is the unmistakable trace of the Spirit at work. This is the grace we especially pray for in this Christ Mass. This is the vision entrusted to us.

That all of us - laity, clergy, Religious - may bear one another's burdens, and so carry forward the mission of the Church. That the holy oils blessed in this liturgy for use this year throughout our Diocese may not remain sealed in vessels but may seep into the world of everyday life.

That through us and our shared priestly ministry, a dry and weary world - wounded by conflict, strained by uncertainty, adrift because of a lack of purpose and direction in so many hearts - may taste again the richness of God.

And so may we – especially the ordained here present – continue to be for others, a pouring-out of healing, of strength, of quiet, radiant joy drawn from the eternal Olive Tree: Christ crucified, risen and glorified. Amen.

+ *Niall Coll*

Bishop of Raphoe