

Priests are united, branches of same tree

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

Bishop J. Peter Sartain delivered this homily during the Chrism Mass April 10 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew.

People often tell me how much they love to see us priests together, especially when we concelebrate Mass, and most especially when we concelebrate the Chrism Mass. I think you recognize instinctively that there is more to this than simply seeing old friends and former pastors. You are seeing us as we are, in the perspective of the deepest truth about our vocation: we are branches of the same tree, branches that are fundamentally related to one another, branches of a tree that is rooted in soil made fertile by the blood of Christ, branches whose source of life is the Eucharist, branches of that Tree who is Christ himself.

As priests, our roots in the Church are deep and absolutely essential to who we are — which is to say, our roots in Christ and his passion are deep and absolutely essential to who we are. If each of us were independent agents, there would be no need for us to come together; we would hang out a shingle and dispense our goods, our services and our training as best we could. But we are not independent agents. We are instruments of the one priest, Jesus Christ, and we have been filled with something that does not come from us and that does not belong to us. We have been sent to you by your Shepherd, who has bid us care for you and love you as he does, who has sent us to bring you the fruits of his passion.

Part of the extraordinary mystery of Christ's resurrection is that he is always present to us — nearer to us in person than we could possibly imagine, present to us in time as a contemporary, here and now filling the Church with his life-giving grace, like the blood that courses through our veins. At Mass we do not reminisce about things past, as if remembering events that are significant to our history but remain in the past. No, at Mass we are present at the Lord's Supper, at Calvary, because Jesus is eternally present to us, and the fruits of his sacrifice are inexhaustible.

It is in the light of that truth that we best understand the ministry of priests. Priests are called by the Lord Jesus to place themselves entirely at the disposal of his presence, to be always at his side as he loves those for whom he shed his blood. A priest does not "deliver" a message as would a courier. Through the grace of ordination, he has been so overtaken by Christ that as he preaches the message, Christ himself preaches it. He dares to proclaim Christ's presence precisely because Christ is present in him. He celebrates the sacraments because Christ is at work in him. By no means just a courier, he is to become the message himself. None of this is his own doing; it is Christ and Christ alone who saves.

I would like to say something personal to my brother priests. Christ is at work in you because he loves you, because he is your shepherd, your brother, your Lord as well. When he reminds us that we are "useless servants," it is only to make clear once again that it is he who is at work in our ministry, not we. We could not possibly accomplish what he has accomplished. He does not say we are "worthless." To the contrary, the very fact that he has invited us to be his instruments is an expression of his profound, personal love for us.

His cherished friends, we have been invited to recline around the table of his Last Supper, to share especially intimate moments with him, and to bear a mystery that is far beyond us. In a way that continually surprises us, he sends us as his instruments — and accompanies us — to his people, so that not one of those he ransomed by his death will ever be lost.

At times, he also asks us to share personally in his cross. We carry the cross in many forms: the burden and fatigue of ministry; illness and the loss of loved ones; the rejection of his Gospel;

the failure of our plans; the feeling of aloneness; the confusion of our own sinfulness. Ironically, even those experiences are signs of our Lord's love for us, signs that he allows us to share intimately in his passion.

It is not because Christ is far away that we priests have this experience, but because he is especially near and wants so much for us to share in his solitude and his passion that he places us squarely in their path.

In other words, as his chosen and intimate disciples, the ones he uses to be his presence to the flock, we will also come to know his cross in an intimate way. In the face of difficulties and challenges to our generosity, we must never forget that our personal experience of the cross will bear fruit for the people we serve, in ways we will not always understand. But because every cross is the cross of Christ, every cross can be fruitful. He teaches us through everything that happens, but we cannot choose in advance the lesson we will be taught.

To learn the lesson, to bear the cross with courage, we must be continuously rooted prayerfully in him and joined lovingly to one another. The Chrism Mass reminds us of that necessity.

Together we are branches of the same tree, who is Christ.

This evening, as a presbyterate joined to your bishop, you will renew your promises to Christ and his Church. He, in his turn, will affirm again, as he does at every moment, his choice of you as his beloved, his son, his instrument, his friend, his priest. And from this liturgy he will send you to his flock, so precious to him that he shed his blood for them. Remember it is you he sends, and that you have his eternal promise to be in you as your very life. The Spirit of God has anointed you.

Do you have an intention for Bishop Sartain's prayer? If so, send it to him at Bishop Sartain's Prayer List, Diocese of Little Rock, 2500 North Tyler St., P.O. Box 7239, Little Rock, AR 72217.