



# The Holy See

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## HOLY CHRISM MASS

### *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS*

*Vatican Basilica*

*Holy Thursday, 29 March 2018*

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#### **[Multimedia]**

*Dear brother priests of the Diocese of Rome and other dioceses throughout the world!*

When I was reading the texts of today's liturgy, I kept thinking of the passage from Deuteronomy: "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" (4:7). The closeness of God... our apostolic closeness.

In the reading from the prophet Isaiah, we contemplate the Servant, "anointed and sent" among his people, close to the poor, the sick, the prisoners... and the Spirit who is "upon him", who strengthens and accompanies him on his journey.

In Psalm 88, we see how the closeness of God, who led King David by the hand when he was young, and sustained him as he grew old, takes on the name of fidelity: closeness maintained over time is called fidelity.

The Book of Revelation brings us close to the Lord who always "comes" – *erchómenos* – in person, always. The words "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him" makes us realize that the wounds of the Risen Lord are always visible. The Lord always comes to us, if we choose to draw near, as "neighbours", to the flesh of all those who suffer, especially children.

At the heart of today's Gospel, we see the Lord through the eyes of his own people, which were "fixed on him" (Lk 4:20). Jesus stood up to read in his synagogue in Nazareth. He was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it until he found, near the end, the passage about the

Servant. He read it aloud: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed and sent me...” (*Is* 61:1). And he concluded by challenging his hearers to recognize the closeness contained in those words: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (*Lk* 4:21).

Jesus finds the passage and reads it with the proficiency of a scribe. He could have been a scribe or a doctor of the law, but he wanted to be an “evangelizer”, a street preacher, the “bearer of joyful news” for his people, the preacher whose feet are beautiful, as Isaiah says. The Preacher is always close.

This is God’s great choice: the Lord chose to be close to his people. Thirty years of hidden life! Only then did he begin his preaching. Here we see the pedagogy of the Incarnation, a pedagogy of inculturation, not only in foreign cultures but also in our own parishes, in the new culture of young people...

Closeness is more than the name of a specific virtue; it is an attitude that engages the whole person, our way of relating, our way of being attentive both to ourselves and to others... When people say of a priest, “he is close to us”, they usually mean two things. The first is that “he is always there” (as opposed to never being there: in that case, they always begin by saying, “Father, I know you are very busy...”). The other is that he has a word for everyone. “He talks to everybody”, they say, with adults and children alike, with the poor, with those who do not believe... Priests who are “close”, available, priests who are there for people, who talk to everyone... street priests.

And one of those who learned from Jesus how to be a street preacher was Philip. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that he went about evangelizing in all the cities and that they were filled with joy (cf. 8:4.5-8). Philip was one of those whom the Spirit could “seize” at any moment and make him go out to evangelize, moving from place to place, someone capable of even baptizing people of good faith, like the court official of the Queen of the Ethiopians, and doing it right there at the roadside (cf. *Acts* 8:5.36-40).

Closeness, dear brothers, is crucial for an evangelizer because it is a key attitude in the Gospel (the Lord uses it to describe his Kingdom). We can be certain that closeness is the key to mercy, for mercy would not be mercy unless, like a Good Samaritan, it finds ways to shorten distances. But I also think we need to realize even more that closeness is also the key to truth; not just the key to mercy, but the key to truth. Can distances really be shortened where truth is concerned? Yes, they can. Because truth is not only the definition of situations and things from a certain distance, by abstract and logical reasoning. It is more than that. Truth is also fidelity (*émeth*). It makes you name people with their real name, as the Lord names them, before categorizing them or defining “their situation”. There is a distasteful habit, is there not, of following a “culture of the adjective”: this is so, this is such and such, this is like... No! This is a child of God. Then come the virtues or defects, but [first] the faithful truth of the person and not the adjective regarded as the

substance.

We must be careful not to fall into the temptation of making idols of certain abstract truths. They can be comfortable idols, always within easy reach; they offer a certain prestige and power and are difficult to discern. Because the “truth-idol” imitates, it dresses itself up in the words of the Gospel, but does not let those words touch the heart. Much worse, it distances ordinary people from the healing closeness of the word and of the sacraments of Jesus.

Here, let us turn to Mary, Mother of priests. We can call upon her as “Our Lady of Closeness”. “As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly *surrounds us with God’s love*”, in such a way that no one feels left out (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 286). Our Mother is not only close when she sets out “with haste” to serve, which is one means of closeness, but also by her way of expressing herself (*ibid.*, 288). At the right moment in Cana, the tone with which she says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you”, will make those words the maternal model of all ecclesial language. But to say those words as she does, we must not only ask her for the grace to do so, but also to be present wherever the important things are “concocted”: the important things of each heart, each family, each culture. Only through this kind of closeness – “concocted” in the same way meals are prepared and cooked in a kitchen – can we discern that wine that is missing, and what is the best wine that the Lord wants to provide.

I suggest that you meditate on three areas of priestly closeness where the words, “Do everything Jesus tells you”, need to be heard – in a thousand different ways but with the same motherly tone – in the hearts of all those with whom we speak. Those words are “spiritual accompaniment”, “confession” and “preaching”.

*Closeness in spiritual conversation.* Let us reflect on this by considering the encounter of the Lord with the Samaritan woman. The Lord teaches her to discern first how to worship, in spirit and in truth. Then, he gently helps her to acknowledge her sin, without offending her. And finally, the Lord infects her with his missionary spirit and goes with her to evangelize her village. The Lord gives us a model of spiritual conversation; he knows how to bring the sin of the Samaritan woman to light without its overshadowing her prayer of adoration or casting doubt on her missionary vocation.

*Closeness in confession.* Let us reflect on this by considering the passage of the woman caught in adultery. It is clear that here closeness is everything, because the truths of Jesus always approach and can be spoken face to face. Looking the other in the eye, like the Lord, who, after kneeling next to the adulteress about to be stoned, stood up and said to her, “Nor do I condemn you” (*Jn* 8:11). This is not to go against the law. We too can add, “Go and sin no more”, not with the legalistic tone of truth as definition – the tone of those who feel that that they have to determine the parameters of divine mercy. On the contrary, those words need to be spoken with the tone of truth as fidelity, to enable the sinner to look ahead and not behind. The right tone of the words “sin no more” is seen in the confessor who speaks them and is willing to repeat them seventy times

seven.

Finally, *closeness in preaching*. Let us reflect on this by thinking of those who are far away, and listening to Peter's first sermon, which is part of the Pentecost event. Peter declares that the word is "for all that are far off" (*Acts* 2:39), and he preaches in such a way that they were "cut to the heart" by the kerygma, which led them to ask: "What shall we do?" (*Acts* 2:37). A question, as we said, we must always raise and answer in a Marian and ecclesial tone. The homily is the touchstone "for judging a pastor's closeness and ability to communicate to his people" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 135). In the homily, we can see how close we have been to God in prayer and how close we are to our people in their daily lives.

The good news becomes present when these two forms of closeness nourish and support one another. If you feel far from God, please draw nearer to your people, who will heal you from the ideologies that cool your fervour. The little ones will teach you to look at Jesus in a different way. For in their eyes, the person of Jesus is attractive, his good example has moral authority, his teachings are helpful for the way we live our lives. And if you feel far from people, approach the Lord and his word: in the Gospel, Jesus will teach you his way of looking at people, and how precious in his eyes is every individual for whom he shed his blood on the Cross. In closeness to God, the Word will become flesh in you and you will become a priest close to all flesh. Through your closeness to the people of God, their suffering flesh will speak to your heart and you will be moved to speak to God. You will once again become an intercessory priest.

A priest who is close to his people walks among them with the closeness and tenderness of a good shepherd; in shepherding them, he goes at times before them, at times remains in their midst and at other times walks behind them. Not only do people greatly appreciate such a priest; even more, they feel that there is something special about him: something they only feel in the presence of Jesus. That is why discerning our closeness to them is not simply one more thing to do. In it, we either make Jesus present in the life of humanity or let him remain on the level of ideas, letters on a page, incarnate at most in some good habit gradually becoming routine.

Dear brother priests, let us ask Mary, "Our Lady of Closeness" to bring us closer to one another, and, when we need to tell our people to "do everything Jesus tells them", to speak with one tone of voice, so that in the diversity of our opinions, her maternal closeness may become present. For she is the one who, by her "yes", has brought us close to Jesus forever.