



Chrism Mass Homily

Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption, Fall River

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This year, the Church—and the whole world—celebrates 800 years since the death of St. Francis of Assisi.

Many people assume that Francis of Assisi was a priest. In fact, he never was. He was only ordained to the Order of Deacons.

He chose not to pursue the priesthood out of profound humility and deep reverence for the Eucharist, feeling unworthy to celebrate the sacred mysteries. Though he served as a deacon, he believed that ascending the altar as a priest required a purity he did not possess. He preferred instead to remain a humble friar. Imagine that—Francis of Assisi did not think himself worthy to be a priest. And what about us?

Throughout his life, Francis held priests in great reverence. In the biography written by Thomas of Celano, we read that Francis frequently kissed the hands of the priests he met “with great faith,” honoring the sacred consecration their hands received on the day of their ordination.

It is also recorded that Francis often said, *“If I met an angel and a priest at the same time, I would greet the priest first.”*

Not because the priest is holier than the angel, but because only the priest can speak the words that bring Christ to the altar. Only the priest can pronounce God’s forgiveness. Only the priest stands at that mysterious intersection between heaven and earth, where divine mercy meets human need.

For Francis, the priesthood was never about status but about service. Not about authority, but availability.

Regardless of a priest's personal holiness or imperfections, Francis held them in high esteem, recognizing that God had set them apart for a sacred purpose.

The mystery of the Holy Eucharist—an extension of the Passion—held a central place in his life. He cared deeply about everything related to the worship of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. We hear of Francis urging the clergy to show proper reverence for the Sacrifice of the Mass, but we also see him sweeping poor churches, seeking sacred vessels, and even preparing altar breads himself.

Francis was overwhelmed by the humility of God: the God who became small in Bethlehem, who bent down to wash feet in the Upper Room, and who continues to give Himself completely in the Eucharist. This mystery shaped everything he did. Because of this, he saw the priesthood—despite human weakness—as the sacred ministry through which Christ remains present in the world.

At every Mass we pray, *“Lord, have mercy... Lord, I am not worthy...”*

And if we are honest, each of us has felt that unworthiness. None of us is worthy. It is God's grace working in us that makes anything possible. The more we recognize our unworthiness, the more open we become to God's action.

It reminds us: it is never about us.

When the Lord spoke to Francis saying, *“Rebuild my Church,”* He was calling Francis to renew hearts—to rekindle faith, to make the Gospel visible once again. How is He asking us today to rebuild His Church?

This mission belongs to all of us. But in a particular way, it belongs to the priest, who must allow Christ to rebuild his own heart again and again.

The priesthood is not something we choose for ourselves; it is something Christ entrusts to the Church for the sake of His people. A priest is not set apart for honor, but for sacrifice and service.

Another model—this one a priest—is St. John Vianney. He transformed a parish and became the patron saint of parish priests, not through important offices or grand projects, but because he allowed God to completely take hold of his heart. He renewed an entire village not through strategy but through sanctity; not through programs but through presence.

He accomplished everything not by brilliance or influence but by holiness born of surrender. He once said, *“The priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus.”*

Yet John Vianney also knew the cost of the priesthood. He endured discouragement, exhaustion, interior darkness, and a constant sense of inadequacy. And still he persevered. Why? Because he believed that God could work wonders through a willing heart—no matter how fragile.

If he were here today, he would remind priests that their strength does not come from talent, but from intimacy with Christ. He would ask the faithful to pray for their priests—not because they are weak in a negative sense, but because the mission entrusted to them is immense.

And he would challenge all of us to let God shape our hearts: patient, merciful, courageous, and full of hope.

We minister with our faith—and also with our humanity.

Brothers and sisters, humility is not weakness. It is strength guided by grace: *“Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* (Mt 11:29)

Do not be afraid to be human, imperfect, or vulnerable. *“...we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.”*

St. Paul captures this truth beautifully. In his suffering he wrote:

“I begged the Lord that it might leave me, but He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast most gladly of my weaknesses... for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12:9)

Pope Francis echoes this: *“The Lord will certainly give you that grace, but He will give it to you in His own divine way.”*

A recent document from the Dicastery for Clergy adds: *“Our very human heart is the place where Christ wants to come, dwell, live, and beat—until we allow ourselves to be pierced with love and for love, in imitation of Him.”*

Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less. It is the quiet strength of knowing who we are before God—sinners in need of grace—and living with hearts open to His will.

Saint Justin Russolillo

Another saint who teaches us about the priesthood is St. Justin Russolillo. For him, the most important aspect of being a priest was working on one’s own sanctification and leading others to holiness. He believed passionately that we are all called to be saints—and that we *can* become saints.

So deeply did he believe this that he himself achieved holiness, and the Church canonized him on May 15, 2022. One of his characteristic expressions was: “**Fati Santo**”- “*Become a Saint.*” Every time he met a priest or seminarian, he would say to them: “**Fati Santo.**”

He once wrote, “*Nothing will attract more people to God than the holiness of priests.*” We often emphasize intellect, eloquence, administration, and social skills—but forget that the heart of priesthood is holiness.

My hope is that we all grow in love for Jesus in the Eucharist with the same burning devotion shown by Francis, John Vianney, Justin Russolillo, and so many others. May they teach us humility, simplicity, and compassion. May they help us embrace the cross with courage and proclaim the Resurrection with joy.

And may they teach us to rebuild the Church—not by our strength, but through surrender to Christ, just as they did.

I am moved by the words Pope Francis once addressed to priests:

“Dear priests, thank you for your open and docile hearts; thank you for your labors and for your tears; thank you, because you bring the miracle of mercy... you bring God to the brothers and sisters of our time.”

And so, I also echo the words of the Michaelle Quist from his Poem -Priestly Prayer:

“Here I am, Lord. Here is my body. Here is my heart. Here is my soul. Lord, tonight, while all is still and I feel sharply the sting of solitude, While men devour my soul and I feel incapable of satisfying their hunger; While the whole world presses on my shoulders with all its weight of misery and sin. I repeat to you my “Yes”.

Despite every challenge, and because of all that is good and beautiful, we repeat our **Yes** to today. **Yes—today and always, Yes. Amen.**