



Sermon of the Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche,  
Bishop of New York  
at the  
Holy Eucharist with Reaffirmation of Vows and  
Consecration of Chrism  
Holy Tuesday, April 16, 2019

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a pleasure to be with you all again on this Holy Tuesday, and I thank the Dean and Cathedral Chapter for their hospitality which makes this possible. I am also delighted to welcome the Right Reverend and Right Honourable Richard Chartres, the 132nd Bishop of London, and the Reverend Elaine Farmer, a priest of the Church of Australia, who are our guests today. I had the privilege of being Bishop Chartres' guest at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London five years ago, and it is our honor to have you among us today.

As you know, we had a fire in this cathedral on Sunday. It was entirely contained in a closed room down in the crypt, and the fire department came and controlled and extinguished it quickly. There was the loss of a few things we cared about and more that was less important to us, and the damage to the building was minimal. The fire was discovered shortly after 10:00 in the morning, between the 9:00 and 11:00 Palm Sunday services. When the cathedral was closed about a half hour later we decided to move the 11:00 service out onto the pulpit green, and in just about fifteen to twenty minutes, the very well trained and organized cathedral team had an altar and cross, several hundred chairs (all set up in rows, with aisles), vestments, palms, eucharistic vessels, bread and wine, and a sound system all ready to go out on the lawn. With a full choir and hundreds of worshippers, we celebrated Palm Sunday outside, and we felt pretty good about ourselves and our resourcefulness.

Then yesterday the 850-year-old Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the flower of French Gothic Architecture, and a world treasure, was consumed by fire and is



catastrophically, though apparently not fatally, damaged. I must say that that put our smaller crisis of Sunday into perspective.

Pray for Paris. And for France. And pray for everyone who has had their spirit lifted and the possibilities of their lives enlarged by standing for a moment in the midst of such fleeting beauty.

Shortly after Notre Dame's spire teetered and fell, and after the cathedral roof had caved in, and fire was everywhere, I went out to the Post Office to mail a couple of envelopes to the Internal Revenue Service, and as I came back, filled with grief over Notre Dame, I decided to pass through this cathedral on my way home. As I entered, I remembered coming through the same door on the morning after our big fire in December 2001. I was here then and I'm still here. Everything was wet and dirty and covered with smears of water-soaked ash and chunks of charcoal that crunched underfoot. The church was ugly with filth and waste, and thick with dark, oily smoke. Through the openings in this north wall you could stand in the middle of the church where you are right now and look up through what had been the roof of the north transept to see the sky. And the air burned your nose. And there was no place to rest your eyes.

But as I walked yesterday through this our restored and beautiful cathedral that I love so much, I wound up in conversation here in the choir with a Kurdish couple from Bremen, Germany, and a young Brit from London named Oscar. Oscar had not heard about Notre Dame, and as it was explained to him, he looked up into our stone vaults, and passed his eyes over the long nave of Ralph Adams Cram's masterpiece, and reflected that he is a frequent visitor to the great cathedrals of England, and they seem so timeless to him, so glorious and so much transcending the changing fortunes of history, that he can't imagine that they could suddenly be gone. I thought so too. Forty-seven years ago I was in architecture school and had to draw the floor plan of Notre Dame and eight other cathedrals from memory on a final exam. I loved them, I loved the idea of them, and I took them for granted. They were here forever. They would be here forever. But now we know. Eight hundred years of perfect order matched exactly against an errant spark and twenty-four hours of chaos.

Hundreds of tourists and pilgrims visit this cathedral every day, but there are periods, often early in the day, when you can walk under these vaults virtually alone. And then



it's very quiet, in this "forest of stone," as its designer called it. And the sun steaming through the stained glass windows shoots rainbows over everything. In the stillness and the peace you can feel what seems like this largest-of-all-gothic-church's ageless and eternal stability. As Oscar said, its timelessness, its always-was-here-always-will-be-here rootedness. But actually, gothic architecture is anything but peace. There is no serenity. It is built into the architectural form that the whole gothic structure is held together by the powerful opposing forces that simultaneously want to implode the church and blow it up. The massive stone vaulting that pushes down and out on the walls while the great buttresses strain to push the building in on itself. A contest that never ends. Sometimes on my day off I will go get the key and climb the steps to that space above the stone vaults and below the roof above, and see the great piles of stone that Ralph Adams Cram stacked atop the vaulting to bring those opposing forces into perfect equilibrium. And I marvel. This cathedral, like every gothic church, is an icon of stress, of forces of massive destruction held in check by other forces of massive destruction, but which create out of themselves a different kind of stability, not a stability born of rest, but of strife and contending forces holding one another forever in check. It says something to me about the impossibility of the Church, in all of its weal and woe. A two millennia tradition that is in every moment trying to fly apart and flee from itself forever.

It is into that church that you and I were ordained.

I live with a map of the Diocese of New York on an easel in my office. Every day I stand in front of it and think about the churches and communities it represents. Two hundred churches — urban rich and urban poor, rural rich and rural poor, immigrant and native born, liberal and conservative, praying in a dozen languages, of every ethnicity and race, the greatest city in America together with the upstate farms and woodlands. With the mighty Hudson River and the meandering Appalachian Trail running through it. Saint Luke's in the Bronx gets 900 people on Sunday morning; Saint Andrew's in South Fallsburgh gets seven. A third of our churches are growing, some substantially so. A third are holding their own, swimming upstream a lot of the time. A third are in long term or systemic decline, locked in that intractable struggle to survive. No one of them is greater than another, and no one of them less. And I love every one of them, and the clergy and people in them.



But I was a parish priest too, for years, in churches large and small and rich and poor. And I was the canon pastor in this diocese for ten years before you told me to be your bishop. So I know the glories and the costs hidden within that map. I know about the miracles and wonders that happen at the hospital bedside, and at graveside. I know that inexpressible thing that happens inside you - that ineffable grace - when you go to the hospital at midnight and pray over someone who is unconscious and doesn't know you are there, and no one knows and no one sees, and then you get in your car and go home and go back to bed. I know the profound happiness of shepherding a community of people filled with trust and hope and faith and courage. I come to your parishes on Sunday and become so wistfully jealous when I see you surrounded by the happy, shining children in your congregation. But I also know the loneliness. And the desperation. And the conflicts. And the budget and the parochial report and the audit and the boiler and the roof. And the pressures that come to you from the people in your parish, and the pressures that you put on yourself, and I understand the unfair and undeserved expectations - impossible to meet - that are laid upon you by the church and the world, and sometimes by me. And I know what two o'clock in the morning means, and the fear of the coming day. And I know you can't talk about these things, even to those you love and trust most dearly. Once at a clergy retreat in another diocese we were asked when the last time was that we had cried at church, and one friend said, "Every day, sometimes in joy, but not always." Jesus said, "Satan has asked for you; he wants to sift you all like wheat." You give everything you have and everything that you are for this, and the whole time the church is trying to blow itself up, to fly apart, and to run away from itself forever. The simple fact of the church is sheer miracle, it is a wonder that it even is, but you don't always want to see how the sausage gets made.

I know that having this giant clergy event in the middle of Holy Week could not be more inconvenient. You are never as busy all year long as you are right at this minute, and I have asked you to give up most of this day, and I know some of you drove two and a half hours to get here and it's the same going home. But I don't know how to do what we have come here to do unless we are staring straight at the cross of Christ.

What sustains us? With all of the joys and failures, with all that the church is and all that it is not, with the countless blessings of this life, but with an equal measure of simple human cost, in the midst of all that comes and goes, and all that is here and gone, how is it that we might be constant and true, not overwhelmed, still brave and strong



and faithful, so that we may endure. And not only endure, but thrive? Which we must, because we have been given the Cure of Souls, the charge to bear the lives and spiritual possibilities of others. We must thrive, that they may.

What sustains us? It is the promises that we make which sustain us, and the grace of God to help us keep them.

So much of the sacramental life is all about the making of promises and vows. Baptismal vows, renewed and affirmed by the vows of Confirmation. Marriage vows. Ordination vows. We make oaths and promises at every step of our lives. The Christian Life is a Contract with God. It is not about feelings, it is not in the end about sentiment, and it is not sentiment that will carry us over the long term. It is that we are bound together under a Rule. We gave our word, and strangely, when all else fails, and it is two o'clock in the morning and we open our eyes to see the terrors of the day standing around our bed, extending the accusing finger - those things of which our conscience is afraid, those things done and left undone, the offenses done to us by others, and much more so the offenses done to others by us - we may yet rise in the morning and face the day and all that the day will bring and BE THE CHURCH, because we gave our word. And sometimes, that only. We promised that we would.

One day early on, when we really didn't know in full what this would mean, we made promises to the integrity of our own spirits, to the care of the flock, to the church which enfolds us and its bishop, to deeper and richer prayer, and the study of scripture, to the mercy and peace and justice of God, to our humble or sometimes humiliating self-offering before God. And the people we have been given, they who look to us to help them into an authentic experience of God in Christ, expect us not to forget. I am convinced that we become defined by the promises we make, and by the deacons and priests and bishops we hope and want to be, and the world and the church may, and they do and will, take our measure by the quality with which we keep those promises. And then, even through our thrashing about and trying and failing and trying and prevailing, and sometimes maybe because of but mostly despite our own cleverness, and certainly beyond our understanding, God may yet be glorified.

So we are here to renew our promises. We are here to recommit. We're still all in. And I think it's worth the day we give.



And I'm talking to the ordained ministers today, but I guess you should know that this is pretty much what I tell your thirteen-year-olds every Sunday when I come around your churches to confirm them. I tell them that I am convinced that every person in the world, religious or not, Christian or not, has an obligation to at some time come out before their family and community and the world and whatever or whoever they believe in, and declare themselves. To let us know what kind of men and women they intend to be, and whether they can be counted on, and whether they are going to wreck everything or be healers of the breach. And I tell them that the way we do that as Christians is in baptism. By the promises we make. By renouncing the raging destructive assaults of the Devil and embracing and affirming and choosing our dear Savior Jesus, and the complicated, blessed and costly life he lived and still offers us. And I tell them that there was a time when they made that declaration, and made the baptism promises or those promises were made on their behalf by others, and that all I am going to ask them in the confirmation service is whether or not they still mean it. And I tell them that how they answer that question will be among the most important words they will ever say.

Us too. Amen.