Spirituality
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis spreads incense as he celebrates Mass on Holy Thursday in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican April 18, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

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Just as Jesus always sought to be with the people to serve, teach and heal them, so, too, must priests always be in the midst of God's people, "pouring ourselves out" for them, Pope Francis said.

Being with the people "is the most beautiful place" to be, he told priests during the chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica April 18.

"We must not forget that our evangelical models are those people, the 'crowd' with its real faces, which the anointing of the Lord raises up and revives. They are the ones who complete and make real the anointing of the Spirit in ourselves; they are the ones whom we have been anointed to anoint," he said.

Presiding over the first of two Holy Thursday liturgies, Francis blessed the oils that will be used in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, ordination and the anointing of the sick. Deacons brought the silver urns, one by one, up to the pope, who breathed over the open vessels, symbolizing the infusion of the Holy Spirit.

As Holy Thursday commemorates the day Jesus shared his priesthood with the apostles, Francis also led the priests, bishops and cardinals present in a renewal of their priestly vows.

He used his homily to reflect on how Jesus related to people, especially the huge crowds that pressed in on him and approached him with their problems, but also were eager to hear his voice and follow him.

From the day he was born, the pope said, Jesus attracted lowly shepherds, kings and wise men, and to the day he was nailed on the cross, his heart drew and still draws people like Veronica, the good thief and a Roman centurion.

The Lord always stood in the middle of the crowd "like a shepherd among his flock," the pope said, and those who gathered around him were in some way transformed by him.

They received the grace of a desire to follow Jesus and by following him, they received the grace of amazement and affection for him, and they received the grace of being able to discern and recognize his authority, the pope said.

The way Jesus encouraged people to be present, he said, contrasts sharply with the "small-mindedness of the disciples, whose attitude toward the people verges on cruelty when they suggest to the Lord that he send them away so that they can get something to eat."

"Here, I believe, was the beginning of clericalism: in this desire to be assured of a meal and personal comfort without any concern for the people," Francis said. But Jesus "cut short that temptation" and told the disciples to feed and take care of the people.

Christ, who is the Word of God made flesh, awakened the charism of discernment in people, whose hearts were moved by "the power of his teaching" and who were amazed how evil spirits obeyed him.

The people also loved how Jesus could leave utterly speechless those who tried to trap him with tricky questions. "They knew how to distinguish" his authority over those who debated him, "and they enjoyed" it.



Pope Francis celebrates Holy Thursday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican April 18, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

Jesus also had a special place in his heart, the pope said, for the poor, the oppressed, the blind and those held prisoner.

"Our cities today are taken prisoner not so much at spear point, but by more subtle means of ideological colonization," he said. "Only the anointing of our own culture, built up by the labor and the art of our forebears, can free our cities from these new forms of slavery."

The stories in Gospel of the poor and oppressed, their simple acts and enormous faith, "carried weight in the kingdom" and would be recorded in the Gospel, he said.

Priests must remember that "we have been taken from their midst, and we can fearlessly identify with these ordinary people," Francis said. "They are an image of our soul and an image of the church."

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Priests must see themselves as the poor with their generous hearts, as the blind, who pray, "Lord, that I may see," and as the oppressed who have been beaten by personal sin but await God's compassion to then "be able to show compassion to others."

Referring to their faculty of administering the sacraments and anointing individuals, the pope told priests, "we are not distributors of bottled oil. We anoint by distributing ourselves, distributing our vocation and our heart."

"When we anoint others, we ourselves are anointed anew by the faith and the affection of our people. We anoint by dirtying our hands in touching the wounds, the sins and the worries of the people. We anoint by perfuming our hands in touching their faith, their hopes, their fidelity and the unconditional generosity of their self-giving," he said.

A priest who learns how to anoint and bless the way Jesus intended "is thus healed of meanness, abuse and cruelty," he said.

Francis asked that by being with Jesus "in the midst of our people, may the Father renew deep within us the Spirit of holiness; may he grant that we be one in imploring his mercy for the people entrusted to our care and for all the world."

Later in the day, the pope was scheduled to celebrate the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper at the Velletri Correctional Facility, about 36 miles south of Rome. He was to wash the feet of 12 prisoners, the Vatican said.