

Chrism Mass 2026
Homily of Bishop Barres
Saint Agnes Cathedral
Tuesday, March 31, 2026 4:00pm

From 2002 through 2016, it was the privilege of Bishop Murphy to celebrate the Chrism Mass here at Saint Agnes Cathedral.

As we gather for today's Mass, we remember Bishop Murphy. In ways innumerable, he impacted our lives. With fondness and deep gratitude, we recall how this Successor of the Apostles was an instrument of grace.

The crozier I carry this afternoon is his. For many a liturgy, firm in his left hand, it was carried into this cathedral, as well as into churches throughout Long Island.

It serves today as a powerful reminder of our bond with him, even in death. As we remember Bishop Murphy and prepare for his funeral rites next week, we pray at this Mass that he rest in the peace of Christ.

The Chrism Mass Bishop Murphy celebrated and which we gather for again today manifests the communion of our local Church in union with the universal Church. It makes visible our unity as the People of God in the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

It reminds us of who we are: one people, drawn from every nation and tongue, reborn through Baptism, and called to holiness and mission, each according to his or her vocation and ecclesial mission in life.

At this Mass, the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick are blessed, and the Sacred Chrism is consecrated. The rite is deeply powerful. Oils are brought forward, the Holy Spirit is invoked, and the beauty and strength of our sacramental life are set before us once again. God takes something of the earth — humble oil — and sets it apart, so that through these holy oils He may touch, heal, strengthen, and sanctify His people.

Celebrated so near to Holy Thursday, the day on which Our Lord instituted the sacred priesthood, the Chrism Mass also proclaims the gift of the priesthood. It reminds us, bishops and priests, of our solemn duty to safeguard the communion bestowed by Christ.

We bring many intercessory prayers to this Chrism Mass.

We pray for a rich harvest of vocations to the priesthood in Nassau and Suffolk counties and in the universal Church.

We pray for peace and justice here at home and in Ukraine, the Middle East, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Haiti, and in so many other troubled regions of our world.

We pray for those persecuted for their faith, particularly in Nigeria and India, and for the protection of the religious liberty of all people.¹

We pray for a renewed and courageous witness to the Gospel of Life, especially after the sad legalization of assisted suicide in our state.

We pray for immigrants and refugees, and for comprehensive immigration reform.²

And we pray, in union with Pope Leo XIV, for the ethical and moral development of artificial intelligence — that it may always serve the dignity of the human person, promote justice and solidarity, and never obscure the truth about who we are as children of God.³

As a nation, we look ahead with gratitude and hope to the 250th anniversary of the United States of America this coming Fourth of July.

As Catholic priests, we will be celebrating the missionary fireworks provided by so many priests in American history.

¹ See Robert Royal, *The Martyrs of the New Millenium: The Global Persecution of Christians in the Twenty-First Century*, (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2025).

² See: 1) Bishop Barres, *Statement on Comprehensive Immigration Reform: On the First Anniversary of the Canonization of Saint Oscar Romero*, October 14, 2019, Available at drvc.org; 2) New York State Bishops, *For You Too Were Once Aliens*, Memorial of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, November 13, 2025, Available at drvc.org; 3) United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Special Message on Immigration*, November 12, 2025, Available at drvc.org.

³ See Bishop John Barres, “In the Workshops of Saint Joseph and Saint Josemaria Escriva: A 21st Century Catholic Theology and Spirituality of Work in an Era of Epochal Artificial Intelligence Change and Industrial Revolution,” Institute for Human Ecology at The Catholic University of America, February 10, 2026. Available at drvc.org.

Holy priests have shaped the history of the United States. Their heroism, evangelizing zeal, and pastoral charity are woven into our nation's story.

Looking to those priest Saints and Blesseds who labored in this part of God's vineyard that is *the land of the free and the home of the brave*, we see a wide and beautiful American kaleidoscope of holiness and mission in the Catholic priesthood.

Think of the New York Jesuit martyrs: Saints Isaac Jogues (1607-1646), Rene Goupil (1608-1642), and Jean de Lalande (d. 1646).

Remember the Redemptorist Saint John Neumann (1811-1860), the Bishop of Philadelphia, and his confrere, Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos (1819-1867).

Consider the missionary hearts of Saint Juniper Serra (1713-1784) in California and Saint Damien of Molokai (1840-1889) in Hawaii.

Recall the October 31, 2020, beatification of Blessed Michael McGivney (1852-1890) and the worldwide Catholic mission of the Knights of Columbus.

Call to mind the Capuchin Blessed Solanus Casey (1870-1957), a mystical porter who opened the Doors of Christ to so many souls.

Think, too, of Blessed Stanley Rother (1935-1981), a parish priest-missionary from Oklahoma who died as a parish priest-martyr in Guatemala.

Spanning centuries, the priestly holiness of these Saints and Blesseds has animated the life of the Church and contributed to our growth as *one nation under God*.

On Monday, February 9, 2026, we learned that this illustrious list of holy priests will soon grow, as we received news of the September 24th beatification of Archbishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1975).⁴

This Chrism Mass 2026 is a fitting time to celebrate Bishop Sheen's role in American Catholic Church history and his role in the unfolding and development of Catholic contemplative global missiology from the Second Vatican Council's *Ad Gentes* to Pope Saint Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and beyond.⁵

⁴ See Bishop Barres' February 10, 2026, Statement "Bishop Barres and the Church of Rockville Centre give God Thanks for the Beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen," at drvc.org.

⁵ See Bishop Barres' article "Embracing the Missionary Call," in *Mission: A Magazine of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, Fall 2024, 34-36.

I used to take my retreats in Rome in the late 90s on the campus of the Pontifical Urbanianum University, which overlooks the Vatican, at their retreat center named “Centro Internazionale di Animazione Missionaria.” In English, “The International Center for Missionary Animation.” I always loved that name which was a proclamation in itself.

The first time I entered the chapel, I found large statues of Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Terese of Lisieux – co-patrons of Catholic global worldwide mission.

I also found a large bust of Bishop Sheen in the library.

I thought to myself how beautiful that our American Saint Paul of Catholic worldwide mission is at the very heart of this retreat house that serves primarily priests and religious from the Third World.

And then a few years later a more knowledgeable priest said to me: “His bust is there because he paid for the retreat house!”

This Chrism Mass is also time to celebrate Bishop Sheen’s teaching on the Catholic priesthood in his books, *The Priest is Not His Own* (1963), *Those Mysterious Priests* (1974) and his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay* (1982), as well as in his retreats to priests.

Let’s ponder today a few of the soon-to-be Blessed’s insights into our priestly life from *Treasure in Clay*. In the opening chapter, Bishop Sheen states that in the vocational calling of the Catholic priest, there “is enacted the frightening tension between the dignity of his calling and the corruptibility of his clay.”⁶

What exactly does this mean? It means that there is a glorious transformation in a priest’s being or ontology that occurs when he receives the Sacrament of Holy Orders at his Priesthood Ordination. This change in his being, this imprinting of a sacerdotal sacramental character, calls him to the heights of holiness in his vocation.

However, that’s not the complete story. The other part of the story is our fallen human nature – the absurdity of a priest’s sinfulness, his falls, his comic foibles and weaknesses, his stupidities, banalities and blind spots.

⁶ Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen*, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1982), 4.

There is a tension between the nobility of our priestly ontology and our fallen human nature and the struggles we have as priests and human beings with the capital sins of pride, anger, avarice, lust, sloth, envy, and gluttony.

The incongruity can result in both tragedy and comedy. For instance, I only understood the novels and literary technique of J.F. Powers (1917-1999) in *Morte d'Urban* (1962) and *Wheat that Springeth Green* (1988) when I finally appreciated that they were about this tension.⁷ His humor and charitable satire about the daily realities of the clerical world and the comic foibles of priests demonstrate at the same time a love and esteem for the *Treasure in Clay* that is the Catholic priesthood.

Bishop Sheen himself owned up to his own weaknesses and clerical pettiness. He writes: “The keeping of the scorecard of past wrongs, the chewing of a cud of resentment, licking of the wound, and the memories of how we received them, the playing of the tapes of injustices real or imagined, were so many proofs that I had not thoroughly digested what my Faith taught me and my lips confessed, that all trials come from the Hands of the Loving God.”⁸

Sound familiar, brothers? It’s nice to know that a bishop and priest on his way to beatification struggled with what you and I struggle with every day.

G.K. Chesterton, the primary literary influence on Bishop Sheen, once said: “The glad Good News of the Gospel is the Good News of Original Sin.” God works mysteriously through our human weaknesses as priests as he worked through the betrayals of Peter and the thorns in the flesh of Paul.

Bishop Sheen writes: “Vocation is not immune to failures. We pray and do not become more spiritual; we mortify and still are tempted; we take a resolution and still return to backbiting. When we have labored ‘all the night and have taken nothing’ we are summoned to recommence our response to vocation. There is not a priest in the world who has not had in his life a long chain of generous beginnings, the rowing out again into the very sea we thought was barren. Even the Church itself is in the process of beginning again. She is persecuted, sometimes driven out of a country, but she comes back, as from persecuted Poland came the successor of Peter

⁷ See Nathan Kilpatrick, “‘Light Even More than Love’: The Irony of the Cross in J.F. Powers’ *Wheat that Springeth Green*,” in *Logos* 18:3 Summer 2015, 57-80.

⁸ Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen*, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1982), 345.

...The Second Look meant to me what it has always meant to all my brother priests – the joy of beginning again. Seventy times seven, you can always begin a new chapter, start a second mile, catch a second wind, launch out into the deep, excavate new layers for untold spiritual wealth. There is always, in the Church, that wonderful Land of Beginning Again.”⁹

Every Chrism Mass is a time to begin a new and more holy and dedicated chapter of our living of the Catholic priesthood, especially as priestly promises are renewed.

Brothers, as we ask for deeper humility of heart and the grace of priestly repentance and conversion for the graces we have squandered as priests and bishops, we never lose hope.

We realize in a new way that the treasure of the priesthood we receive is a Treasure in Clay, a treasure calling us to heroic holiness right in the daily experiences of our weaknesses.¹⁰

Brothers, the gift of our priesthood from God to serve His people is indeed a glorious Treasure in Clay! In the short remaining time we have on earth, let’s allow the Holy Spirit to cleanse, strengthen, and launch us in a new and beautiful way, and let’s permit the beatification of Archbishop Sheen to be a Divine Mercy instrument of deeper holiness in our presbyterate.

Let me close with words of Bishop Murphy. He preached them ten years ago in 2016, when he celebrated his last Chrism Mass. They are powerful and encouraging as we advance in holiness and mission together.

He said then and says to us again now: “Jesus Christ, the Priest, is our best friend. He is by our side. He knows us and we know him: the One we call *Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the Kings of the Earth*. He still washes our feet so that we can wash the feet of our people. Abide in Him and he will abide in you. He will bless you and keep you joyous and faithful in your priestly life now and always.”

⁹ Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen*, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1982), 330, 343.

¹⁰ Bishop Sheen explores the same theme in the tenth chapter of his 1963 book *The Priest Is Not His Own* entitled “The Priest as Simon and Peter.” (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 162-184.