

## **Anniversary: an invitation to greater holiness, deeper relationship with Christ**

*Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo*

*November 15, 2014*

*Mass Celebrating Diocesan 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Cathedral of St. Mary  
Fargo, ND*

“Remain in me as I remain in you...Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit.”

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome, and thank you for being present for this beautiful and historic moment in the history of the Diocese of Fargo. One of the blessings of my service as bishop is the opportunity to travel around the parishes of our diocese and see the beautiful countryside and fields of grain. The soil is fertile and the seed is planted on good ground.

One hundred and twenty five years ago, when Bishop John Shanley arrived in North Dakota to begin his service as bishop, he also found fertile soil. He found that the seed of faith had been planted on good ground and had the potential to bear fruit a hundredfold. He went first to Jamestown, where the new diocese was to be centered. Later for practical reasons, he relocated here to Fargo, and went about the work of establishing a diocese. Of course, the Church was already present. There were upwards of 19,000 Catholics and 40 parishes in the diocese, which then encompassed all of North Dakota. And they were served by 32 priests. The faith was already living among the people, but in many ways they were like sheep without a shepherd, scattered and wandering. And Bishop Shanley was given the mission of shepherding the flock, of gathering and leading them to the Lord. To him was given the task of forming and building this church on the foundation of Christ himself so that the faithful might remain always in him and bear much fruit.

On an occasion like this, we must certainly give thanks for the numberless blessings that have been bestowed on this diocesan church. We first thank God for the faith and perseverance of our ancestors, those courageous souls who first came to North Dakota and set up homes and farmsteads here. Within their families they prayed and shared the gift of faith with their children. And they also built churches, houses of God, because they knew how futile their lives would be without devotion to God, without places where they could hear his holy Word and celebrate the sacraments. The Catholic faith in this state flourished largely because of the faith of its people, who cherished their Catholic faith and passed it along to us. So, we give thanks to God for our ancestors in the faith.

We also give thanks for those heroic persons who fostered the faith and gave themselves to Christ with such dedication. Father Belcourt, the great missionary of North Dakota who had the true spirit of an adventurer. Bishop Marty, who travelled through this wild country and planted seeds for others to nurture. And Bishop Shanley himself, the first bishop of this diocese, who came at the age of 37 and literally spent himself for Christ and his church until his death 20 years later. There are many others too. Mother Mary Agnes Hughes, one of the great pioneers of religious life in our diocese, and Bishop Muench, a beloved shepherd whose efforts for the universal church were so valued that he was made a cardinal by the Pope himself. In fact today I

am wearing the ring and carrying the crosier of Cardinal Muench as a reminder of this heritage. And then there are the unsung priests, deacons, religious, and lay faithful who have lived and shared the faith so zealously over these 125 years. They are too numerous to name, but God knows them and chose to work through them so we might be here to celebrate this liturgy today.

This anniversary cannot, however, be merely a moment of nostalgia. We are wise to look back with thanksgiving, but we must also look to this moment and to the days yet to come. Tomorrow we will begin another year, and then another. As we remember and give thanks for all that has been done, we are confronted with a challenge: what now, what comes next? In many ways, we must simply continue, we must carry on as we always have by living the faith to its fullest. But hopefully, this moment of celebration and reflection will give us a renewed sense of mission, an even more vigorous faith. Pope Francis tells us that the Church must be in a constant state of mission, a perennial condition of going forth, going outwards.

We know the borders of our parishes and our diocese. We know the dimensions of this church family, but we must not be limited or held back by them. We are invited by our Lord to dwell always in his presence, to remain in him as branches on the vine. He is the source of our life, and apart from him we can do nothing. But united with him, we can do all things. This anniversary should be for all of us an invitation to greater holiness, to an even deeper relationship and intimacy with Christ, who is the cornerstone, the foundation for this Church. As Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians, "Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." If we rest firmly on him, then we have the potential to build and to become that temple of the Lord that Paul speaks of. And remaining in him as branches on the vine, we will also be able to give witness to this faith that we have received as a gift. As we draw life from him, the Church can then share this life with others.

This is the mission that we have been given: to dedicate ourselves entirely to spreading the Gospel and building up the Body of Christ in ways appropriate to our own time. The great cloud of witnesses, the bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful, who first lived the faith in this diocese, pray for us now and call upon us to heed the call of Pope Francis to be "missionary disciples." They urge us to bear witness to Christ once again, ready to reach out and accompany those who no longer practice their faith, or those who are searching for the fullness of truth and love revealed by Christ and communicated by the Holy Spirit.

The heroic faith and witness of those who went before us prompts us to rededicate ourselves and this diocese to the mission of evangelization, to living and sharing the Gospel with our brothers and sisters. Jesus himself asks us to be present in every community and every neighborhood of this diocese, to open our arms to others, to support families as the principal agents of evangelization. He asks us to do all we can to make our parishes vibrant, our schools solid, and our charities a sign of Christ's mercy and compassion for those in any need. He asks us to defend the dignity of life, to reach out to the young, and to revere the aged and the infirm. And most importantly he asks us, each of us, to remain in him so that we may bear much fruit and become more fully his disciples.

Jesus tells us, "Without me you can do nothing." But, we can do all things in him who gives us life and strengthens us, Jesus our Lord who is the way, the truth, and the life. And may Mary Immaculate, our Blessed Mother and patroness of our diocese, pray for us, accompany us and draw us ever nearer to her Son. Amen.