

Anniversaries lead us forward, where we are and where the Lord wants us to be

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

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*100th Anniversary Mass
Basilica of St. James
Jamestown, ND*

It is a great joy to be with you for this happy parish celebration, the 100th anniversary of the dedication of this Basilica of St. James. I am especially happy to welcome my brother bishops who are here today, first Bishop Thomas Donato, auxiliary bishop of Newark, and the titular Bishop of Jamestown. Your Excellency, welcome to North Dakota and to Jamestown. We are honored to have you with us. And I welcome Bishop David Kagan, the Bishop of Bismarck and former administrator of the Diocese of Fargo. For ten months, Bishop Kagan was our shepherd, and he was exceptionally helpful to me when I was called upon to serve as the new bishop of this diocese. Bishop Kagan, welcome back! And I also greet and welcome Fr. Bitz, who served so well here as pastor at St. James. I'm sure no one is surprised that upon his retirement, Fr. Bitz went right on working in the Lord's vineyard, now in Bismarck. Bishop Kagan must have given him a pretty good signing bonus!

And I greet all of you, the parishioners of St. James Basilica. This is a great occasion for several reasons. Of course, it is the 100th anniversary of the dedication of this church. But this is also the 125th anniversary of the founding of our diocese, which was originally centered at Jamestown and encompassed the whole of North Dakota. Those were challenging days for the church and for this parish. Bishop Shanley came from St. Paul to be our first bishop, and let's just say he didn't have an easy time of it. At the time, Jamestown had about 1500 people, and conditions were hard. The Church itself struggled, and not everyone was exactly enthusiastic to welcome a new bishop. The pastor here at the time, Fr. Cassidy, announced to the parishioners shortly before, "The Bishop will be here soon. Ye can't pull the wool over his eyes, and don't ye forget it!" To the newly arrived bishop, he said, "You are welcome, Bishop. The carpenter will be here in the morning with his bill for \$350, and he wants spot cash." Those were colorful times!

Wouldn't Bishop Shanley have been surprised to see the glorious church built here in Jamestown just five years after his death. This present church was built during the pastorate of Msgr. Geraghty, one of the towering figures of the parish and the diocese, whom I have heard called "the old man." He was pastor here for a mere 48 years, and perhaps some of you remember him. He and all of his fellow pastors deserve the gratitude of all for their commitment to shepherding God's people here at St. James. And of course, this church was built not only by the pastor but by the many faithful of the parish who contributed to its completion. We are all indebted to them for their strong faith and sacrificial spirit. They knew there had to be a place for God in their lives, and they had the foresight to build this spiritual home where they could hear the Word of God, receive the grace of the sacraments, and pass along the faith to their children. This church is truly built on the faith of many generations, certainly that oldest generation who were the founders, but this generation too, you who continue to make this church

your spiritual home, and who see in this parish a first glimpse of the Kingdom that Christ has established among us.

Whenever we celebrate the anniversary of a parish church like St. James, it is appropriate to consider what this structure is all about. It is a place of beauty, to be sure, a fitting dwelling place for Jesus Christ, our King. But it is more than just a beautiful building. It is a place of grace, love and devotion, the grace and love of God at work in the lives of his people, and the loving devotion of his people given back to God. We can't help but be thankful for the 100 years of history in this holy place, where the faithful have come to worship and to participate in the life of the Church. Just think how many baptisms, how many confirmations, how many weddings and funerals have been celebrated here. And even more, how many Masses and how many Confessions have there been? Thousands, tens of thousands! For 100 years, the Eucharist has been celebrated in this Church, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ has been re-presented for us day in and day out, year in and year out, drawing us into the marvels of our Lord's paschal mystery, his work of salvation. And during this time, your good pastors, all the way back to Msgr. Geraghty and those who came before him, and now up to the time of Msgr. Wald, have also celebrated the healing sacrament of Reconciliation, and the faithful of this parish have had an opportunity to come to the Lord and to seek his mercy and forgiveness. What a remarkable thing to consider that God has been at work in this place over all these years and has touched the lives of so many people, even before any of us were around to remember! How many young people were taught the faith through religious instruction in this parish? And how many of you present today were formed in the faith right here at St. James!

But as I mentioned last weekend at the celebration of our 125th anniversary as a diocese, this isn't only a moment for nostalgia. Anniversaries also lead us to look forward, to see where we are and where the Lord wishes us to be. As our culture and society become more secularized, they become a kingdom without God! God and faith are marginalized, and often forgotten, so all the more reason that we need a holy place where the faithful can gather and draw strength from our Lord, where we can be formed into the Kingdom that Jesus himself has established. Our young people need to know Christ in their lives, so they too can enter into the glorious history of those who have been parishioners here and who have gone from here into the world. And of course, there is a great multitude of our brothers and sisters all around us who know nothing of our Lord and who crave the love of God and knowledge of his truth.

It should be clear, then, that Jesus our King has given us a mission. In addition to living the faith ourselves, he asks us to share it and to welcome others into the joy of his kingdom. And of course, that kingdom is a kingdom of compassion and mercy. So, like those in the Gospel parable, we must be ready to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick. Just as we come to this house of God for worship and prayer, to share in the divine life of our Savior, we must also go forth from here as his apostles, as evangelizers, as witnesses of his love, his mercy, and his truth. Pope Francis tells us often that the Church cannot keep to itself or close itself in. Rather, the Church must always have an outward vision and be ready to extend the kingdom of Christ to everyone in our families and in our community. And this outward movement starts with your own witness, your own living of the faith. Our neighbors first learn about our faith by learning about us!

My friends, we have been welcomed into the kingdom, into the house of God for a purpose, and that is to open the way for others to enter in with us. By our example and witness of faith, we have an opportunity to welcome others into the kingdom, into this holy place where Jesus embraces us and offers us his saving grace. By your love for Christ and fidelity to his

Church, you will declare to others that they too are welcome in the house of the Lord. So let us not only rejoice in the past 100 years, but let us also open wide the doors so that many more will enter and share in the joy of the Kingdom.