

Say 'yes' to God's call to conversion, to communion with the Catholic Church

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

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Many years ago when I was a newly ordained priest, a woman came to see me in the parish office, and she said she wanted to join the Church. Naturally, I was delighted to hear this, but as always, I asked her what brought her to want to become a Catholic. She was a teacher and had led a group of students on a tour of Europe. And when she entered one of the great cathedrals, Mass was being celebrated. She saw the glorious windows, heard the beautiful choir, and watched the celebration of the Mass, and she was completely taken with it. She said she knew that God was present in all of this and that she had to be part of it.

I know other people who have been inspired by the example of the saints, like the humble work of Mother Teresa with the poor of the world. One of my own family members was inspired by the witness of Pope John Paul II, and joined the Church soon after seeing him up close. Sometimes, we are attracted by the witness of those we know, our own family members or friends who actively live the faith and show us how beautiful and how real it can be. Each one of you here has your own story, your own reason for taking this step, for coming forward to be welcomed into the Church. And all of these stories and pathways are unique. No two are exactly alike.

But there is one common thread that unites them all, and that is the person of Jesus. In all our stories of conversion and saying yes to the call of God, we find Jesus who first invites us. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus inviting people to be his followers, and before they can come to him, he comes to them. So it is with the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke, which we just heard. Jesus was approaching, and Zacchaeus became curious. Jesus was passing by and Zacchaeus watched from a tree. But then Jesus stopped, and he spoke. He addressed Zacchaeus directly, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." And Luke tells us, Zacchaeus came down quickly and received him with joy. We can practically see Zacchaeus come bounding out of that tree, eager to greet Jesus and welcome him.

Jesus calls all of us out of our trees, he comes close and he speaks to us. To each one of us, he says, "Come, for today I must stay at your house." In other words, he invites himself into our lives and asks to dwell with us, to abide with us. And by his grace, each one of us has said "yes." Yes, Lord, come and abide with me. Come and make your dwelling with me. Let me dwell in your presence and receive the riches you have to offer. Through your word and your sacraments, let me share in your life.

Needless to say, Zacchaeus was not a saint already. He was a tax collector, and wealthy, and the crowd around Jesus grumbled and called him a sinner. He was probably despised by his fellow Jews for collaborating with the Romans and for extorting payments out of his neighbors. But the moment he heard of our Lord's approach, the moment he heard the voice of Jesus calling him personally, a voice charged with the power of the Holy Spirit, Zacchaeus leapt at the opportunity to start a new life as his follower. As Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house...For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

Dear friends, I thank you for being here today with your family and friends, your pastors, sponsors, and catechists. Thank you for responding like Zacchaeus to the call of Jesus to be fully united with him in his one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. To become Catholic today is exciting, because it has become so countercultural. In this 21st century, our culture is changing. It is full of opportunity and promise, but it is also filled with challenges and even dangers for those who wish to live in Christ and according to his Gospel. In many ways, our culture is growing more distant from God, and this is why as Catholics we have an important mission. The Church, and each one of us as its members, must witness to the presence of God in our lives. We must show to our brothers and sisters what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and the joy that comes with discipleship. We must be apostles of mercy, and proclaimers of truth, first by the example we give to others. So thank you for responding to Jesus. Thank you for climbing down to meet him and for welcoming him into your house. Thank you for becoming his disciple and for joining his Church, along with Pope Francis, and the bishops, and all our brothers and sisters in faith.

“Today salvation has come to this house... For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” Faith is God’s gift, the inspiration of the Spirit, inviting us to respond and to live out the gift that we have received. Sometimes people expect a perfect Church, but that’s not the one that Jesus has established. The Church is for sinners, for Zacchaeus, for people like us who need God’s grace, and who need to grow in faith, hope, and love. Through the sacrament of Baptism, you will die to sin and be reborn as children of God and as members of his Church. Through the sacrament of Confirmation, you will receive the strength of the Holy Spirit so that you may become more like Christ and bear witness to his love which is stronger than death and more powerful than sin. In the Eucharist, you will receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, so that he may dwell in you and hold you close to his heart. And candidates for initiation will also experience the sacrament of Reconciliation, the sacrament of God’s mercy and forgiveness in preparation for the Easter Vigil. Thus do we prepare our hearts for that joyous day of the Resurrection when we will reject sin and pledge to live as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. So in this liturgy today, let us thank the Lord for his gift of faith and for calling us to be his disciples. We all need this grace of conversion, and we can trust that he will lead us on the way.

Your presence here today brings joy to the whole Church. It is a sign that the Lord and his Holy Spirit are at work in our midst. As you prepare to receive the grace of our Lord through his sacraments, please count on my prayers and the prayers of the whole Church. Please know how welcome you are! May God bless you and keep you always in his love.