

## **The challenge and sacrifice are great, but the promise is far greater**

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

*June 23, 2013 – 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Given at the Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, ND*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, how blessed I am to be with you on this beautiful day in this beautiful Cathedral church. As you know, only a few days ago I was ordained as the new Bishop of Fargo, and I already feel very much at home and very much among friends. I have had the opportunity to meet some of you personally, and I look forward to meeting all of you at some time or another. I first want to express my gratitude for the many promises of prayers, and even sacrifices that have been offered on my behalf.

In fact on Wednesday, after the Ordination Mass, as I was greeting people outside the Cathedral, one of the many people who approached me asked if I like chocolate, and I said, “Of course, a lot!” She informed me that she and the members of her parish had been giving up chocolate for me and my intentions in the days leading up to my ordination. And I thought to myself, “Now that’s love!”

As you know, I come from Nebraska, and I have been a priest for twenty-four years. I believe that I share with all of you a love for these Great Plains of ours, and the wonderful gifts of life, and faith, and family that are so valued here in the state of North Dakota. It’s a joy to be here. Although I could never have expected such good fortune as this, I am very, very happy to begin this next chapter of my priestly life with you, as your bishop, and I thank you again for your welcome.

When Jesus asks a question in the Gospel, we can be sure that he is not doing so casually or idly. He asks many questions that challenge his disciples. “What are you looking for?” “Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?” “Could you not stay awake with me for even an hour?” And many, many more.

Today, he asks a question that is equally challenging and at least as important as all the rest. And it is directed not only to the disciples who are around him at that moment, but it is directed to us, here and now. And the question is this: “Who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:18). He had heard what other people thought of him – “Some say you are a prophet. Some say you are Elijah. Some say you are John the Baptist come back from the dead.” Finally Jesus asks them directly, “Who do you say that I am?” And without fully understanding what he was saying, Peter speaks up and he answers, “You are the Christ, the Anointed One of God” (Luke 9:19-20).

Peter might have thought at that moment that he knew what the Messiah – the Christ – was all about. He would be a king. He would be a ruler. He would be the conqueror of their enemies. They had already heard Jesus’ profound teachings and seen some of his many miraculous works. And I suspect he and the others thought, “There can only be glory for us if we continue to associate with this remarkable man.”

But Peter didn't yet grasp the whole reality of who Jesus was, or what it meant to be the Christ. And so, Jesus fills out the picture in a way that might have been a bit shocking to Peter and the others. He explains to them that he, the Son of Man, must suffer and be rejected, and, yes, even die at the hands of his enemies. And then he goes on to add, mysteriously, that he would rise on the third day. He also explains to them that if they truly want to be his disciples, his followers, they too must share his fate. "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

Again the question comes, "Who do you say that I am?" My friends, how we answer that question will determine how we live our lives as followers of Jesus, as Catholics. Do we say that he is the Son of God, the Savior who gave his life for our salvation? Or, like some in the world today, do we say that he is merely a great teacher who came to do things our way and to make things more pleasant for us here and now?

Jesus makes it very clear -- that to be his follower is not necessarily to enjoy peace and comfort in this life. In fact, we can be almost certain that the opposite is true. To be a follower of Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It requires a commitment, a willingness to carry the crosses that come our way, great or small, to give of ourselves unreservedly, and to witness to his truth courageously. And if we feel overwhelmed by the prospect of such a commitment, we have only to remember: Jesus never speaks of his cross and of dying to self without also speaking of rising and new life. The challenge and the sacrifice may be great, but the promise is far greater.

The Church celebrates two saints this week who show us what this kind of discipleship looks like. We know John the Baptist well. We will celebrate his birth liturgically tomorrow, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June. John the Baptist was a kinsman of Jesus, a prophet, and, as we know, he was a thorn in the side of Herod and his wife. He challenged them to live according to God's law, and he suffered death because he dared to speak the truth to a powerful ruler.

Fifteen centuries later, we find St. Thomas More, whom the church honored yesterday. Thomas More was a great statesman in England in the sixteenth century. He was a very holy and pious man. He was the chancellor to King Henry VIII, his right hand man. But Thomas More could not bring himself to assent to the King's divorce and re-marriage, and he certainly couldn't go along with Henry's decision to appoint himself the head of the Church. He too stood fast before the power of the king, and he gave his life as a martyr for the truth.

Neither of these great men, saints separated by many centuries, would say that they lost their lives for a mere teacher. No, they gave their lives for their Lord, to witness to the holiness and the primacy of God. They both answered the question of Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" by sacrificing everything for what was right and true.

My friends, we too must answer this question. In our own day and in our own nation, the challenge of being a follower of Christ and adhering to his Church is getting more difficult. The forces of secularism seek to marginalize faith and to keep it out of the public square. Our own government, with its well-known mandate that would force religious people and institutions to

offer insurance for abortion, and sterilization, and contraception, has intruded on the rights of the faithful to live their faith authentically and without fear of coercion or penalty. The sanctity of life has already been challenged and even compromised, and now the sanctity of marriage is under assault, as well. The rights that we have assumed to be sacred are now being diminished or even set aside.

For this reason, the Bishops of the United States once again this year have declared a Fortnight for Freedom, a two-week period of prayer, education, action and, yes, even fasting, to renew our commitment to the faith and the right to live that faith fully and without hindrance by the powerful of this world. For these two weeks leading up to our Independence Day, we are all invited to pray, to make sacrifice, and to openly profess our solidarity in faith and our intention to be true to our Lord and our Savior.

Maybe this seems like sober news, but we should remember: from the very beginning Jesus expected to be rejected, and he foresaw that his followers would be rejected, too. He expected his own crucifixion, and he foresaw that his followers would carry the cross, too. He also foresaw his own resurrection and the glorious life that awaited him with his Father. And he saw that those who would be faithful to him would experience resurrection, too. It is the good news.

Jesus asks us what he asked Peter and the other disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Our mission now as bishop, as priests, and people is to answer that question as Peter did, “You are the Christ, the Son of God,” and to do so joyfully, confidently, resolutely and even sacrificially. Ours after all is a joyful faith, not a dour faith. It is a faith not of our own making, but has been given to us as a gift by Christ, the Son of God. And if we answer that question with fidelity, if we live this faith with fidelity, and with confidence, and with joy, then not only will we gain eternal life, but through our witness, others will, too.

Let us go forth then in peace, confident not in our own strength, not in our own gifts, but in the gifts that Christ has given to us. And let us answer our Lord’s question as Peter did, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.”