

This column was originally printed in the October 2018 issue of *New Earth*, the magazine for the Diocese of Fargo.

## **A time of shadows and light**

Bishop John T. Folda

The last few months have once again been a harrowing time for the Church. We have been shocked and angered at more revelations of abuse by clergy, including bishops and cardinals. Many of you have expressed anger at what is coming out, and I share your anger and frustration. Many of you have also graciously offered your support and encouragement. I and my brother priests are deeply grateful for the support you offer to us, and on their behalf, I pledge our determination to live our priestly lives with faith, purity, and devotion to Christ and to his people.

The case of the former Cardinal McCarrick is especially vexing because his predatory behavior was apparently known to others and was allowed to continue. Along with the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I expect a full investigation of his actions and of those who may have enabled his wrongdoing. There have been allegations that these facts were known in the Vatican as well, and I hope these too will be fully investigated. Too much damage has occurred, and glossing over these events is unacceptable.

This raises the question of the accountability of bishops. Now more than ever it is necessary to put in place a mechanism or process for holding bishops accountable for abuses and misdeeds, with the same or greater rigor we expect of priests. It has been proposed that a third-party reporting system be established to receive allegations against bishops, and that such allegations be passed along for investigation to law enforcement and to higher Church authority, including the Pope, who alone has authority to discipline bishops who commit ecclesiastical crimes. I fully support such an approach, and believe that it must incorporate the leadership and expertise of the laity.

I am encouraged that the number of cases of abuse by clergy has plummeted in recent times, a fact that is too rarely reported. Most of the cases we read about now are from many decades ago, but that does not excuse them and should not make us complacent. It only shows us that the measures put in place have made a difference, and that we must remain always vigilant. One case of abuse in the Church would be too many.

Some have asked me what they can do, and I appreciate their inquiry, because it shows an awareness that we must all come together in Christ to overcome the current struggles. The first answer I always give is prayer. Please pray to our Lord for healing in his Church. Pray for those who have been victimized, whether they are minors or adults. Pray also for bishops and priests, that they may persevere in the calling they have received to serve our Lord. And pray for those who have been scandalized and are struggling with their faith because of the sins of their shepherds. In times of trial, it is also appropriate to fast and do penance in atonement for sins. Even if we are not personally guilty of these crimes, we can pray and fast for the conversion and healing that is so needed in the body of the Church. I have asked all our pastors to offer public prayers of reparation in our parishes, and I hope many of the faithful will take part. And most importantly, we can live our faith with renewed fervor, realizing that the sins of a few do not determine who we are as Christ's Church. The best way to confront the evil of this time is to firmly reject sin and go out as the missionary disciples Jesus has called us to be.

Despite the bad news we are hearing, there are causes for celebration as well. On September 9, I was privileged to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Assumption Church in Pembina. Several hundred people, six bishops and 25 priests joined with the faithful of Pembina to celebrate and give thanks to God for blessing this parish so richly. Assumption is the oldest parish not only in the Diocese of Fargo, but in all of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. I suspect that additional research would add a few other states to that list as well. Assumption Church was established by Father Severe Dumoulin, a French-Canadian missionary who was sent to serve the traders and settlers, and especially the Metis people who lived along the Red River.

It is remarkable to consider that the Church has been present and active in our area for 200 years, through more difficulties than most of us could imagine. Before large parts of our country were even settled, the Catholic faith was lived right here in what is now North Dakota. During those early years, the church buildings at Pembina were flooded more than once and even destroyed by cannon fire. The priests were recalled to Canada for a time, but the people persevered in faith and the parish endured. Several parishioners who were present for the celebration were sixth generation descendants of the early settlers and members of Assumption Parish, and they remind us how crucial it is that we pass along the faith through our families and in our communities. This parish, like so many others that celebrate anniversaries each year, has been a spiritual home for the faithful and remains a sign of Christ's abiding presence among his people.

When we are tempted to become discouraged at the sins all around us, it is good to remember the mercy of God that planted the faith in little settlements and parishes all over the countryside of North Dakota. When we feel our own weaknesses and failures, it is important to recall the brave souls who went before us and kept faith in God through joys and many trials. When we wonder if the Church has a future, it is essential that we do our part and put our faith in Jesus Christ, who has sustained the faithful through even greater struggles for many centuries. He is our Lord, and he has promised us: "I will be with you always, even until the end of the world."