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125 Years: A Heritage of Faith

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On Nov. 12, 1889, Bishop John Shanley arrived in Jamestown to begin his service as bishop of a newly established diocese. At that time, the diocese was centered on Jamestown, and encompassed the entire state of North Dakota. When the 37-year-old Bishop Shanley arrived, he found a set of challenges that would make most of us shudder. North Dakota was sparsely populated, and there remained a certain “Wild West” mentality among the people and the clergy. But, Bishop Shanley was a man of singular determination, and he set to work building the Kingdom of God with his new flock.

When Bishop Shanley arrived in North Dakota as its first diocesan bishop, there were perhaps 19,000 Catholics throughout the entire state. He found 32 priests and 40 parishes already established, though many of these were in rough condition. But, 125 years later, the Church has grown and matured. Today, the Diocese of Fargo (which was split to form the Diocese of Bismarck in 1910) has a population of approximately 73,000 Catholics in 131 parishes. We are blessed with 141 diocesan and religious priests, including a significant number who have come to us from other nations. Our 46 permanent deacons give generous service to the parishes and other apostolates of the diocese. And 91 religious sisters continue to give witness to the joy of consecration to Jesus Christ.

The history of the Diocese of Fargo includes the stories of true heroes of the faith: Father George Belcourt, Father Athanase Bernier, Bishop Shanley, Mother Mary Agnes Hughes and many others. In addition, we cannot pass over the heroic lay faithful who came to this state and diocese from other parts of the country or other parts of the world. They settled in a challenging geographical and social environment and brought with them the Catholic faith that we cherish and celebrate today. There are too many to name in this narrative, but their faith and fortitude allowed the Church to flourish as the years advanced. As a relative newcomer, I am still exploring and learning the history and character of the Diocese of Fargo. But, as I read the various accounts of pastors, parishes and people, I can only smile and marvel at the manifest providence of God exhibited throughout this history.

Now, 125 years after our founding, the Diocese of Fargo faces both challenges and opportunities. We face the challenge of a federal government that encroaches on religious liberty and seeks to substitute its own priorities for the truth that Christ has revealed. We face an aggressive secularism in our culture that yields growing religious indifference in some quarters of our population. Some of our communities have dwindled in numbers, and rural parishes sometimes struggle to remain vibrant. But, along with the shadows, there is light. The population of our state is growing, and our parishes are reaching out to welcome new members. We are blessed with dedicated priests, deacons and religious, and our seminarians and novices are a sign of hope for future years. Campus ministry at our state universities is lively and vigorous, and organizations like FOCUS joyfully bring the Catholic faith to our college students. Despite the uphill climb of contemporary challenges, there is undiminished energy in our Catholic schools. And, in response to the perennial human needs of our people, Catholic Charities and Catholic health care institutions extend the compassion and healing of Christ to all.

This anniversary celebration is certainly an occasion for thanksgiving. First, we must give thanks to God for granting the gift of faith to our ancestors who settled this state. There are no accidents in God's providence, and it is by his merciful hand that the faith was planted in North Dakota and allowed to flourish here. For the sake of perspective, it is useful to consider that there are many places in the world where the Catholic faith has struggled to take root, or where it has been persecuted almost into non-existence. So, it is surely by God's grace that we have been the recipients of the gift of faith over these 125 years of our history as a diocese. This is a gift not to be taken for granted.

Secondly, God chooses to work through human instruments, so we also must be grateful to those courageous men and women who first brought the Catholic faith with them to these open prairies and who passed it along to their children and the generations that followed. Through the years of its history, the faithful of the Diocese of Fargo have shown exceptional dedication to their faith. Even when the diocese was largely frontier territory, the people understood the need for churches where they could worship and receive the sacraments. Ordinary people made great sacrifices, even in hard times, to build and maintain their churches and schools, and their fortitude is an inspiration to us today.

But, this anniversary isn't only about celebrating the past. The Church must also look forward with renewed determination to live the faith that we have received. And, in living our Catholic faith, we are invited by our Lord to pass it on as it was given to us. As the world around us becomes more skeptical about religious faith and transcendence in general, we as Catholics must be willing to witness to our faith with zeal and authenticity. Pope Francis and his predecessors have summoned us to a "new evangelization," a readiness to propose the Gospel of Christ with new creativity and renewed ardor. And, far from turning in on ourselves, Christ continues to send us outwards. At the turn of the millennium, St. John Paul II exhorted the faithful to "put out into the deep - *Duc in altum*." At this time of celebration in our diocese, our task must always be to put out into the deep waters of our community and culture, and to lower the nets of Christ's truth and love. I have no doubt that God is still inviting the people of our time to encounter his love and mercy in the person of Jesus, his Son. And, the mission of the Church in the Diocese of Fargo will always be to joyfully share this love and mercy with others. As we celebrate this anniversary of faith, we give thanks to God for the gracious blessings of the last 125 years. And, with trust in the guiding hand of our Lord, we humbly ask him to sustain us and send us out for a new adventure of grace.