

## **The gifts to live out your faith in the world as witnesses to Christ**

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

*Feb. 14, 2016*

*Rite of Election  
Cathedral of St. Mary  
Fargo, ND*

Welcome! I am happy to welcome all of you here to St. Mary's Cathedral, the mother church of the Diocese of Fargo. And I am especially happy to welcome our catechumens and candidates from throughout the diocese, as well as your sponsors, who have come here today for this Rite of Election. This ritual, which always takes place on the First Sunday of Lent, is a joyful moment in the life of the Church, when the Church extends its embrace to those who are preparing to receive the sacraments of initiation at Easter. I say it is a joyful moment, because we always rejoice to welcome new members into our families, and this is doubly true when we bring more members into the family of God, the community of faith that we call the Church.

Around our country, this date is observed as St. Valentine's Day, a day of romance and signs of love and affection. But more importantly, it is the First Sunday of Lent. And I would suggest that even in this guise, it is a day for love and affection, and even for romance. I think you could honestly say on this day that God has initiated a love affair with his people. He allures us to come and dwell with him, he pulls on our heartstrings and reminds us of his unending, sacrificial love for us. He invites us to share in the joy of his feast, to be one with him in intimacy.

There's a certain romance to this way of looking at things, and we can find it all through this season of Lent. During these forty days, God offers every enticement he can to draw us back to him, and he does so for one reason: love. He loves us, and he wants us to be close to him. St. Augustine, one of the early fathers of the Church, said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." God has indeed made us for himself, and he pulls out all the stops to bring us close, to share his life with us, both now and in eternity.

At Easter time, you who are catechumens will receive the sacrament of baptism and experience the first gift of God's divine life, the grace that sanctifies us and makes us holy, the beloved children of God. All of you, both catechumens and candidates, will receive the seal of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, who will give you his gifts and strengthen you to live out your faith in the world as witnesses to Christ. And finally, you will receive the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood, soul and divinity of Jesus under the appearances of bread and wine. In these sacraments, you will enter fully into the communion of the Church, the mystical body of Christ that Jesus himself established here on earth.

And as you continue to prepare for these sacraments, the Church now calls you forward and assures you that you are one with us, and we are one with you. You are part of the family, and we are happy you are with us. We assure you of our prayers and our support. We are uplifted by your courage and your commitment to Jesus, and we look forward to sharing with you at last at the table of the Lord.

Lent is a time for conversion, a time to accept the grace of God that will change our lives. And this conversion is not just for our catechumens and candidates, but for all of us. It is a time to turn more completely toward Jesus, who beckons to us to draw close to his heart. During Lent, we are challenged to let go of the sins of our past and to embrace the way of virtue and holiness, the pathway to union with God in heaven. And that requires a decision from each of us. We must decide whether or not we want to belong fully to Christ, or if we prefer to hold back from him.

In the Gospel we just heard, Jesus meets Zacchaeus, a tax collector. Because he was a tax collector, it was assumed that Zacchaeus was a sinful man. And that might have been true, but Zacchaeus was also a man who was searching. He apparently sensed that he wanted more in his life, more than what he could attain by himself, more than what the world could give him. So, when Jesus was passing by, Zacchaeus was intrigued, he was curious. He must have heard something about this Jesus, and he even climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of him. He probably didn't intend to change his life in that moment, but that's what happened, because Jesus stopped and called out to him. "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." Whatever his past might have been like, Jesus looked at Zacchaeus with love, and entered his house. Perhaps we should say instead that Jesus entered his life, and Zacchaeus opened the doors wide. Jesus made the first move, and Zacchaeus welcomed him in. Zacchaeus opened the doors to his home, and Jesus opened the door to a whole new life, the life that Zacchaeus was yearning for. It was a moment of conversion, a moment of grace.

This is the love story, the romance that I spoke of. God responds to the yearning of our hearts and offers us the love that he created us to enjoy. He gives us the true life that Zacchaeus was looking for. He satisfies that restlessness that St. Augustine felt. He gives his very self, so we might be forever his. Dear brothers and sisters, you have set out on a journey, you have entered a love story. As God says in the prophet Isaiah, "...I am the Lord, your God... your savior... You are precious in my eyes and glorious, and I love you."

Once again, 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 take those final steps toward initiation into the Church, 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!