

Dare to serve, dare to love

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

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*Shanley Baccalaureate
Holy Cross Catholic Church
West Fargo, ND*

Dear brothers and sisters, and dear young friends who are will soon graduate, I'm very happy to join you today for this baccalaureate Mass.

I'm especially glad to celebrate this Mass with you, the graduates-to-be, because it gives us the opportunity to thank our Lord for his many blessings. In fact, the word Eucharist means thanksgiving, it's the most perfect form of thanksgiving, because we can give the perfect offering to God – his only Son. In this Eucharist, we thank him for the gift of life and the gift of our parents and families. They love you very much. We thank him for the gift of faith, which opens up to us the horizons of truth, goodness, and beauty, all the wonders of God himself. We thank him for our teachers, who have shared their knowledge and their wisdom with us. We thank him for our friends, who have accompanied us on this adventure. And finally we thank him for all that will be in our lives, all the adventures to come, all the love we will give and receive, all the opportunities to be servants, for the call to greatness.

I couldn't have picked out a better Gospel for today's celebration if I had tried. The final words of our Lord say it all: "...whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant... for the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." James and John were good friends of our Lord, but they were a little confused. They were angling for positions of privilege in our Lord's kingdom. They wanted to sit at his right and left hand and rule with him. They were thinking about what was in it for them. But Jesus sets them straight. True greatness isn't just about having prestige and power and worldly wealth. There are lots of powerful and wealthy people who aren't all that great.

No, true greatness is about service, being a man or a woman for others. That's what Jesus was all about, as we heard him say: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life..." If we want real greatness, then we are called to be servants, and that's the deacon way. I'm sure you know this, but the word "deacon" means "servant." We're not talking here about being servile, or giving service against our wills. We're not talking about something someone made us do. No, we're talking about service freely embraced, the kind of service one gives out of love, out of passion, out of commitment. That's real greatness.

I'm sure you know that this year the Church is celebrating a Jubilee of Mercy, a time to recall God's mercy to us, but also to share that mercy with others. And what is mercy but reaching out and loving another person in their need? The works of mercy are works of love and service, and they take a thousand different forms. You've received mercy, and I'm sure you've given it: helping a friend with studies; cheering on a teammate who is struggling; being there to listen when someone is sad; reaching out to the one who is alone; giving some of what you have to someone who has less; and on and on. Works of mercy might not be flashy, they might not even be noticed, but every single one of them can change the world, every one of them can make us great. Real greatness comes from great love, and genuine love is self-giving, not self-seeking. That was the way of Jesus, and that's the way he shows us.

In your many years of schooling, you've learned the marvels and intricacies of the physical and natural worlds, you've learned the power and canvas of language and literature, the logic of mathematics, the lessons of history, the beauty of art and music. And hopefully, you've also learned that God is the author of all things, of all goodness, of all truth, and all beauty. Greatness isn't just being smart or having all the information. Greatness is founded upon wisdom, the wisdom that looks beyond ourselves, that looks to God and our neighbor. And the greatest wisdom is the wisdom of love. My friends, dare to serve, dare to love. Our world, the world you are stepping into, needs people like you who are willing to serve, who know what true greatness is all about. Wherever you are headed after graduation, make a point to be of service to others as often as you can, at least once a day, whether in a large or a small way, and I guarantee you that your life will be fuller, richer, and happier.

In one sense, your work is done. You've finished finals, the grades are in, and the diploma is almost in your hands. But really, your work is not done, it's just beginning. Now you are setting off on a new course, and I hope it will be a course of greatness. Part of your call to greatness is also the call to witness, to be a witness to Jesus Christ and the life he has given to us. I'm sure you know not everyone wants to see or hear this witness. Some would like it to be hidden away or forgotten. But it will be up to you to make sure that this witness stays alive, that it can be seen and heard in the world. Don't be afraid to live in Christ. Don't be afraid to live openly as a friend of Christ. Don't be afraid to invite others to get to know Christ, or to share Christ with them. This will be your witness: to live in such a way that others can see Christ by seeing you. That might sound like a pretty tall order, and it is, but don't worry. Jesus has been preparing you for this from the moment you were born, no, actually from all eternity. He has always known you, and he has always loved you, and he always will love you. He only asks you to love him and to live in him, and the rest will follow. You will never be alone; Christ will always walk with you if you invite him along.

I said at the beginning that this is a day to give thanks. And, young friends, I give thanks to God for all of you. You give us great hope, and we look forward to the great things that God will continue to accomplish through you. God bless you.