

“Made for greatness”

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

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Fargodome

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“Made for greatness!” What a great theme for our gathering, and what a great day it has been. I first want to thank all of you for coming today, and I hope it has been a good day for all of you. This is the first Redeemed Conference for Catholic men, and I’m delighted to see so many of you here.

But actually, there’s more history to this kind of event than you might think. When Bishop Shanley came to Fargo as the founding bishop, he found that things were in a bit of a mess. It was the “wild west.” There was very little sense of unity or cooperation, and the faith was practiced sporadically among the people of the state.

Even the priests were a problem. Most of them came here to escape troubles elsewhere, and they weren’t exactly supportive of the new bishop. So Bishop Shanley made a daring move. In 1895 he invited the leading men of all the parishes to a lay congress. He preached directly to the faithful men of the diocese and called them to take up roles of leadership. He spoke to them of their crucial role in the life of the Church, and challenged them to live out their faith.

And from then on, he had a faithful core of Catholic men that he counted on to build up the Church and to pass along the faith at least to their own families and neighbors. It was a turning point, a moment of grace, and I hope our gathering today can be equally powerful in your lives as Catholic men.

“Made for greatness.” What does it mean to be a great man? Being great isn’t the same as being famous. There are lots of famous men who are anything but great. Being great isn’t the same as having worldly success. There are lots of very successful men in this world who I would never describe as great. No, our measure of greatness is quite different than what we see in the culture and in the media.

For us, the true measure of greatness is a person, Jesus himself. As our theme for the day says, we are “made for greatness.” In other words, we are made for Jesus. We are made to be one with him, we are made to be like him. The more we remain with him and in him, the more like him we can become.

And how do we do this? It seems to me that Paul gives us some good direction. In our second reading he says, “If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him.”

But what does this actually mean, to die with him? Obviously, it means the cross. Jesus took up the cross, and he didn’t flee from it. He could have sought the easier way, and that must have been part of his agony in the garden: “Father take this cup from me.” There must be an easier way! But no, he did take up the cross, and from the cross he gave everything he had to give. He poured out his life for all of us, for the most wonderful people in the world, and for the most wretched people in the world, for saints and sinners alike. Jesus gave his all. And he did this not for himself, but for others, for us.

For you and for me, the cross usually involves some kind of sacrifice, something that we are freely giving. There aren’t many of us who will actually be executed as our Lord was, but we are called to the cross nonetheless. We are called to the kind of self-giving that Jesus demonstrated as he willingly mounted the cross.

Those who try to keep everything for themselves are usually intensely unhappy and constantly dissatisfied with life. They never have enough, whether it's money, or time, or leisure, or recognition, or anything. Those who are truly great are never grasping and selfish; they are generous and ready to give of themselves, no matter what they have to give.

Our culture urges us to take, to get, and to keep, but Jesus calls us to give, and then give some more. People who are generous, who give of themselves, are invariably happier than those who don't. They are truly alive because they look outside of themselves and toward those around them. Mother Teresa was like this. She was constantly looking outside of herself toward those around her, especially those that the world had discarded. She said, "A life not lived for others is not a life."

And that my brothers, is one of the keys to greatness, to live our lives for others. To bear the cross and to truly live, not just for ourselves and our own self-interest, but for those around us, especially those whom God has placed in our lives: our spouses, children, parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, and even the strangers we meet every day. To live for others is to be like Jesus, who lived for us and died for us. This is the kind of greatness that doesn't fade but endures into eternity.

Paul then says, "If we persevere we shall also reign with him." A man of great heart is able to stay the course even when the way is difficult. And once again, Jesus is our model. He fell beneath the cross three times, and could have given up, but he didn't. He kept going because he had a mission to complete. He knew that our salvation depended on him, and he persevered.

We too must persevere as we make our way through this life. It's so easy to be distracted, to get off track, or to just sit down and give up. Many have done that; there are countless men like yourselves who have just wandered away or sat down and quit the race. But greatness doesn't give up, it presses onward.

Think of the great saints who have gone before us, determined to stay the course and remain in communion with our Lord. St. Joseph, the quiet, courageous husband of Mary, accepted an incredible vocation from God and became the earthly father of Jesus. He is a model for every Catholic man of quiet, gentle strength. St. Paul himself made journey after journey and recounts the many times he was beaten, stoned, jailed, and shipwrecked. Finally, he was beheaded, but he persevered to the end, teaching and preaching even while he was under house arrest in Rome.

St. Thomas More was a great statesman, and a man of deep faith and integrity. When the king turned against the Church, Thomas could have gone along with him, but instead he stayed the course and remained true to his faith in Christ, even at the cost of his life.

St. Junipero Serra was a missionary to our own land. He left a pretty comfortable career in Spain and crossed the ocean to travel the deserts of Mexico and up the coast of California, establishing missions and sharing the faith with thousands of native people. He stood up for them against the Spanish rulers, and kept going even when he was in constant pain from an affliction of his leg.

Think too of the men of faith who came to settle this state, your grandfathers and great-grandfathers. My own great grandfathers came from Germany and Bohemia and homesteaded in Nebraska. It couldn't have been easy, and I'm sure every acre was precious. But one of them gave part of his land to build a parish church for the country people in their area. They lived their faith and shared that faith with their families and neighbors.

Many of you could also tell stories of your fathers and grandfathers, the challenges they faced, and the fortitude they exhibited. They persevered, and now it's our turn. Now the Lord looks to us to live the faith, to persevere, to stay the course to the end, even when it's inconvenient or difficult.

My brothers, the good news is that we don't do this on our own. We don't become men of greatness just by trying hard. As Steve said to us earlier, it's not about what I do; it's all about what God does. Our greatness is really found in Jesus Christ. He is the one who died for our sins and rose from the dead so we could enter into heaven. He is the one who calls us and equips us for this journey. He is the one who bears the weight of the cross with us, and gives us the grace and strength to keep going. He made us to be sons of God, and he gives us the grace to make it happen. All we need to do is accept it and live it. If we've truly accepted this grace, then no one can keep us from living it.

Brothers, one of the greatest men of our times was Pope St. John Paul II, and he always pointed us to Christ. He said, "Do not be afraid to open wide the doors to Christ." And he also said, "It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise... It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives."

Yes, it is Jesus who stirs in all of us the desire for greatness. God has made us for greatness, and Jesus is always here leading the way and opening the door.