

Dare to believe in Jesus and to live it

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

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**Shanley Baccalaureate
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Dear friends, this is a great day, and I'm very happy to be able to celebrate it with you. It's a day that all of you have been looking forward to for a long time, a day that you've worked hard for, a day that you'll always remember. Graduation day is full of joy, probably with a sense of relief, and I'm sure it's a day of gratitude. I hope you'll remember to thank the many people who helped you get to this graduation day, starting with your parents and families, and certainly including your teachers. Maybe you're also feeling a little bit of nervousness about what's to come, because when you think about it, you're just getting started. Graduation is a completion of one part of your life, but it's just the beginning of a wonderful life that God is still unfolding before you.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and his companions went to Athens. This was a foreign country, a center of learning, and a place where Jesus was not yet known. Paul had already experienced more troubles than you or I could imagine. Just for telling others about Christ, he had been jailed, beaten, stoned, and scourged. Most people would have said, that's it, I've done enough, but Paul kept going. He pressed on to Athens, a place of great sophistication, so they too could hear about Jesus Christ. He stood up in the public forum, and he told the Athenians about God, and about Jesus. He explained to them what they might have already suspected, that all things come from God, that "in him we live, and move, and have our being," and that God gave us his Son to bring us to eternal life. Not everyone listened, and not everyone believed, but some did, and through Paul, many souls were brought to faith in Jesus.

Dear graduates, in many ways you are like Paul. You are setting out on a new course, and you don't know exactly where it will lead. You might have some ideas, but no one can know for sure. And yet, one thing you can be sure of, and that is the love of God our Father, the grace of Jesus, and the help of the Spirit. Like Paul, you are going into new territory, and you have a new mission. If you choose to be, you can be witnesses of Christ to those you meet, new apostles of peace and joy in a world that needs those blessings.

What will this mean, being a witness of Christ? Well, first it will mean that you simply live the faith that you have received. St. Francis said, "Preach always, and if necessary use words." In other words, preach by your way of life. You know the Gospel, you know the essence of our faith, you know what it is to be a friend, a teammate, a Deacon. You know what it is to be a follower of Jesus, so now go out and live it. Keep putting into practice what you've learned and what you believe. This might mean going against the current, being a little different than everyone around you. Good! Dare to be different. Dare to believe in Jesus and to live it. He promised that he came so that our joy would be full; we have only to live what he taught us.

And maybe you'll also have a chance to witness with your words. I guarantee you that you will meet people who want to know who Jesus is, what our faith is all about, why you believe what you believe. Don't be afraid of those encounters. Jesus promised the gift of his Spirit, and he gives it not only to the Apostles but to us. As you set off on a new path, his Spirit will be with you, leading you into all truth, helping you to profess to others what you have received. Just as Paul spoke boldly to anyone who would listen, I hope you too will speak openly, even boldly, of the Jesus who gave his life for you, and now lives. "In him we live, and move, and have our being."

My dear graduates, never underestimate the power of your witness, the impact that you will have on the lives of others. Paul put his trust in God, and stepped out into the unknown. And he became a great instrument of grace for the whole world. Just look at how many people he touched by his willingness to stand up for what he knew to be true. And think how many they touched, and on and on down to our own time. Now you will have an opportunity to carry it forward, to be part of that great chain of witnesses that reaches all the way back to Jesus himself.

Whether you go to school and become a teacher, or an engineer, or a physician, an accountant, or whether you become a skilled laborer, or enter the military, or religious life, our Lord has a place for you in his work. His Kingdom includes you. Dare to be part of that Kingdom. Keep praying, and stay close to the Lord. He wants to walk this journey with you. Keep reaching out, be a friend to someone who is alone. Keep defending the sanctity of life, and lending a hand to the needy. We're living in a world that is filled with stress and anxiety, in politics, at work, at home, on TV, everywhere. But Jesus can change that through you. So be his companions, be his witnesses, be his instruments of peace and compassion, of truth, goodness, and friendship to our stressed-out world.

Soon after he was elected, Pope Francis told a group of young people to be joyful and positive in life. He spoke of three simple attributes: hopefulness, openness to being surprised by God, and living in joy. First, hopefulness: Always know in your heart that God is by your side. He is always with you. He never abandons you. Never, never lose hope, and be lights of hope to others! Second, openness to being surprised by God: Even in difficulties, God surprises us. If we stay close to him, like Paul, then he will open doors to us that we would never expect. Finally, living in joy: If we walk in hope and allow ourselves to be surprised by God, we will have joy in our hearts. We will be witnesses to joy, witnesses to Christ.

Dear graduates, everyone here is proud of you, and wishes you well. I wish you every blessing and pray that you will always live joyfully in Christ.