

Be watchful of challenges, but not daunted by them

Homily by Bishop John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

*Sunday, June 30, 2013 – 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Given at Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Fargo, ND*

Good morning, and thank you for the very kind welcome, Msgr. Wald, Father Asselin and all of you. It's a real joy for me to be with you this morning on this day of the Lord.

As you know, just over a week ago, I was ordained as your bishop at our Cathedral and I already feel very much at home and among friends. Earlier this week, I traveled to parishes in Jamestown, Devils Lake and Grand Forks where I was able to celebrate Mass and meet a great number of our people from a variety of parishes and communities. Now it's good to be with you here at Holy Spirit in Fargo at the invitation of Msgr. Wald. It's a wonderful opportunity for me to begin to move around the diocese, and to get to know the people who are part of our diocesan family. It's a joy for me to get to know our parishes and, once again, I thank you for your very kind welcome.

Some of you are old enough to remember a movie that came out over 30 years ago called "Chariots of Fire." It told the story of two runners who competed in the 1924 Olympic games. One of them was named Eric Liddell, and he came from Scotland. He was widely expected by his countrymen to win just about every race that he was in. There was one catch, though. Eric would not run on Sunday, the Lord's Day. He was a deeply religious, Christian man. He had every intention of going on to be a missionary, which, in fact, he did. He didn't think it was fitting to compete and seek glory for himself on the day dedicated to the Lord. So, despite great public pressure, he skipped those races which he almost certainly would have won, and he settled for only one gold medal, far fewer than everyone expected him to win.

Now Eric could have cut a corner. He could have fudged his principles, so to speak, and run the races, but he would not turn his back on his commitment to Christ.

Now I'm not saying that you can't run on Sundays! That's fine, as long as you go to Church! But, I think Eric Liddell has something to teach us about discipleship. Discipleship requires commitment and it has a cost.

Jesus himself, we are told, set his face toward Jerusalem and he accepted the cross that awaited him there.

The gospel episode that we just heard a few moments ago tells of our Lord meeting several men along the way who wanted to follow him, but they had many excuses and they kept looking backwards (Luke 9:59-62). They held back from fully committing themselves, from fully following our Lord. None of their explanations might seem all that unreasonable. One wanted to bury his father. Another wanted to take leave of his family. But if we look beneath the surface, what do we find? We find hesitation and backtracking. Jesus wants a full commitment. He wants

full acceptance, not a half-hearted “yes” to his invitation, but a full-throated “yes” and a willingness to go all the way with him. When we keep looking back over our shoulders, yearning for what we once had or what we might have had, then we can’t see Christ who is right in front of us.

A true disciple, I think, has two necessary qualities. First, he makes his decision and, once he’s made the decision to follow Christ, he sticks with it. He doesn’t look backwards. Secondly, a disciple is realistic and knows that there is, indeed, a cost to being a follower of Jesus. As he says to the man in the gospel, “The son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). There are sacrifices to following Jesus. He asks much but he promises far more.

Yesterday we celebrated two great heroes of our faith. It was the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, apostles and martyrs of the early church. They lived in a time when following Jesus required absolute commitment. There was a cost to their discipleship! Peter died by crucifixion and Paul died by beheading. Their fellow Christians of that time also suffered and even died in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire because of their commitment to Jesus Christ. Certainly there were some who did give up on that commitment and this has happened throughout our history. But these two apostles and many other believers of that time stayed the course. They were ordinary men chosen by Jesus, just as we have been chosen, and they held fast to their commitment to the Lord.

Now, 20 centuries later, what does this commitment mean to us? What does it mean to be a disciple in the 21st century? What kind of disciples will we be? Perhaps most basically it means a resolution to pray every day, to spend some time in quiet, in reflection, in petition with our Lord. He knows us better than we know ourselves and so, when we enter into his presence, we come to know ourselves as he knows us. Our discipleship also means a commitment to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day. This is the hour that belongs to God. This is the one hour of the week when he calls us together as his family, so that together we might come to know him, to worship him, to hear him in the proclamation of his holy Word, and to receive him in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist at the altar. And we also learn to see him in one another

It’s important to remember that in some parts of the world our brothers and sisters are lucky to have Mass only a few times a year, and they sacrifice much to get there. How blessed we are to celebrate the Lord’s sacrifice so frequently, so readily, and how grateful we must be for this great privilege!

Of course, our discipleship cannot be limited only to Sunday. It must also include a daily commitment, a daily determination to support and participate in the work of the Church, which is the body of Christ. Paul tells us we are all members of this body, and we all have a part to play in its growth, whether through charity to the needy, advocacy for the unborn, visiting the elderly, teaching the faith to our young people, or simply making a regular contribution to keep the lights on. There is a place for all of us in this family that we call the Church.

Just as an athlete, like Eric Liddell, has to discipline himself and condition himself in order to compete in the race, we too must discipline ourselves spiritually, sometimes by saying “no” to ourselves, sometimes by denying ourselves a snack, a drink, a favorite show, or some kind of

recreation that perhaps doesn't quite fit in with our dignity as children of God. If we are committed to our Lord in ordinary ways, then he will give us the strength to remain committed in extraordinary ways.

My friends, we're facing times when this firm commitment is becoming more and more necessary. In our own day and in our own nation, the challenge of simply being a follower of Christ and adhering to his Church has become more difficult. The forces of secularism are seeking to marginalize faith, to keep it on the sidelines, to keep it out of the public square. I'm sure you know our own government, with its mandate that would force religious people and institutions to offer and pay for insurance coverage for things like abortion, sterilization and contraception, has intruded on our freedom, on the rights of the faithful to live the faith freely and authentically and without fear of coercion. The sanctity of life has already been challenged and, in many ways, is compromised, and now the sanctity of marriage is under assault, as well. The rights that we have assumed to be sacred in this nation have been eroded and, in some cases, even set aside.

It is for this reason that the bishops of the United States once again this year have declared a Fortnight for Freedom, a two-week period of time leading up to Independence Day, the fourth of July, this coming week – a time of prayer and education and action and, yes, even fasting and sacrifice, to renew our commitment to the faith and the right to live that faith fully, openly, and without hindrance.

For these two weeks leading up to Independence Day, we are all invited to pray, to make sacrifice and to openly profess our solidarity in faith and our commitment to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But even beyond these two weeks, we must be vigilant and active. We must be watchful before the challenges of our times, but not daunted by them. The church has always faced challenges and she always will. So rather than being scared off by the challenges, we embrace them. We accept them. We see them as an opportunity, an opportunity to live the faith and to share the faith in new ways.

My friends, there are many among us who do not know the joy and the hope and the peace of a relationship with Jesus. There are many who wonder whether their lives have any meaning at all. There are many who seek forgiveness and mercy, but they don't know where to find it. There are many who desire to be of service, who are generous of heart and look for ways to share their gifts. Now, more than ever, our Lord asks us to hold fast to him and to give witness to our own commitment, our own friendship with him. Jesus is, after all, the answer to all of our questions and all of our searching. He is the one who brings beauty and goodness to our lives. He is the one who helps us to understand ourselves as he understands us.

So ask today, "Lord, how can I walk with you? How can I build with you? How can I proclaim with you? How can I truly commit my life to you? How can I communicate to others that you are near, that you are with us, that you love us? How can I be part of your plan for our parish and our diocese and our nation, indeed for our world? How can I share with you in the work of evangelization?"

My friends, if we do commit ourselves to him and if we open our hearts and our lives to his abiding love, then we will have joy and satisfaction beyond our imagining and he will show us what we can do for him. But it takes a commitment. It takes a firm “yes” to the Lord, a firm determination to stay the course and to not look back, but to see before our eyes Jesus our Savior, and to always direct our lives toward him.

It is truly a joy for me to be with you as your bishop, to be with you as a fellow traveler, to be with you as a fellow pilgrim on the way to God. Although I could never have expected this calling to be with you as your bishop, I am very happy to begin this new chapter of my own priestly life in your company, and to share the mission and the adventure of being a follower of Christ with you.

I look forward to many, many years of service among you. As I said this past week, I’m only 51, so I could be here for a while, and I look forward to living and growing in Christ with each one of you.