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## **A Convocation of Catholic leaders**

Bishop John T. Folda

Over the weekend of July 4, an extraordinary event took place. A convocation of Catholic Leaders assembled for four days to pray, celebrate, and collaborate on a simple but important theme: The Joy of the Gospel in America.

Taking our lead from Pope Francis, the bishops of the United States invited leaders from every diocese to gather and dig deeply into the Holy Father's exhortation to be missionary disciples. It seems apparent that the Church is entering into a new era of challenges and opportunities, and so we need to consider the way forward in light of Christ's commission to "Go and make disciples."

I was blessed to be joined by a team of 12 lay leaders and priests from the Diocese of Fargo, people who are deeply involved and committed to the work of the Church in our diocese. Frankly, I could have asked many other equally committed members of our diocese, and it was very difficult to narrow down the list for our delegation.

Together with 3,500 others from around the country – the vast majority lay men and women – we heard many testimonies on the current spiritual and cultural landscape in our nation. We discussed the challenges and opportunities of our time with other bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and lay members of the Church. And, most importantly, we prayed for the grace to embrace the call of our Holy Father to carry on the mission that Jesus has entrusted to his Church, to live "the joy of the Gospel."

As our Holy Father tells us, the Church must be "permanently in a state of mission." In other words, the Church is always on the move, looking outward and reaching out to those on the peripheries. But that mission is not only the responsibility of those who have an official title. We are all responsible for the mission of the Church, and every single believer must be an evangelizing disciple.

During the convocation, there was a unanimous sense that we cannot be concerned only with maintaining things as they are. In an era of new challenges, we must be ready to adopt a new spirit of mission, a more determined effort to extend the love of Christ to others, wherever they might be. And in keeping with the title of the Convocation, we must convey to our neighbors the joy that comes with following Christ.

In one of the keynote addresses, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington D.C. described several characteristics of "evangelizing disciples," and I would like to share a few of his thoughts. He said first that the evangelizing disciple is marked by boldness. He must be ready to strike out into the unknown, even if this means simply addressing the anonymous neighbor who lives next door.

As followers of Christ, we have been anointed with his Spirit, and so have no reason to be fearful. We might feel unequal to the task of teaching the faith to others, but any one of us can give witness to others by living the faith fervently. This will always be the first step of evangelization: to show by our lives what it means to follow Christ. Through our witness and our friendship, we can build bridges for our neighbors to Christ and his Church.

The evangelizing disciple also has a "connectedness" to the Church. Christ founded his Church as a community of believers, and he continues to abide with his Church. In fact, the Church and Christ are inseparable. It stands to reason then that we must remain in communion with his Church if we wish to be true evangelizers. We all have individual talents, gifts, and experiences, but when we join these to the wisdom, experience, and mission of the Church, our own work of evangelization becomes even more fruitful. We are never alone when we are one with Christ and his Church.

The Cardinal also said an evangelizing disciple has a sense of urgency. One specific challenge that we face is the rise of the so-called "nones," those who do not identify with any religious group, or those who have become distant and disengaged from the Catholic faith and community. Some statistics show that for every one person who enters the Catholic Church, six others leave or stop practicing their faith. This has become especially evident among the younger age group. Needless to say, there is much

work to be done, and we cannot be complacent while so many remain distant or even separated from our Lord.

The evangelizing disciple also has a quality of compassion and mercy. Charity and mercy have always been hallmarks of the Church, and the saints show us the way of compassion toward those in need. Even if we cannot yet reach our neighbor with the Gospel itself, we most certainly can reach him with kindness and with mercy. It is often said that the greatest evangelist of the last century was not a pope or a preacher, but a humble religious sister, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. No one else has shown the compassionate and merciful face of Christ better than she, who spent her life serving the poorest of the poor. Each one of us can share the Gospel as Mother Teresa did, by living a life of compassion and mercy toward those most in need.

And finally, Cardinal Wuerl told us that an evangelizing disciple is a person of joy. Our culture is preoccupied with passing pleasure, but the follower of Christ has an abiding joy, knowing that he is loved eternally by God. Pope Francis often warns against a dour, joyless type of Christianity, which attracts no one. The true follower of Christ has every reason to be joyful, and such joy can invite others to be one with our Lord. Leon Bloy wrote that "...joy is the most infallible sign of God's presence." So, let us be joyful missionary disciples in a sometimes joyless world.

One of the most beautiful aspects of the convocation was the spirit of unity that pervaded the entire event. As our nation struggles with political and cultural divisions, the Church manifested a profound sense of unity around the mission we have received from Christ. There is no doubt that we would have disagreements about certain matters, but ultimately we are all united in our common desire to share with others the gifts we have received.

Only in time will we know the fruits of this convocation and the efforts of the Church in the work of evangelization. But we know already that God is at work, moving among his people, offering his grace to all who will receive it. May we all be missionary disciples, ready and eager to share the joy of being followers of Christ.