

“Our Journey of Forty Days”

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

March 1, 2020

Rite of Election

“If by the transgression of the one, the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many.” These words of St. Paul point us right to the person who brings us together here today, and that person is Jesus. My brothers and sisters, I am happy to welcome all of you here to St. Mary’s Cathedral, and especially those of you who are preparing to enter the Church in the coming weeks. Your presence here today is a sign of great encouragement to all of us, and I hope all of you will feel at home in this, your cathedral, the mother church of our diocese. I welcome you who are sponsors, my brother priests and deacons, and all friends and family members. This is a joyful day for the Church, and it’s a joy to see you here.

These forty days of Lent are a special time in the life of the Church, a time of deeper prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. But why do we engage in this penitential season, these forty days of Lent? Matthew tells us that Jesus went into the desert for forty days, and there he fasted and prayed. He was preparing himself for the great mission that his Father had given him, it was like an intense spiritual retreat before he stepped forward into the world as the Messiah.

And so, we make our own journey of forty days as well. You might say we are accompanying Jesus as he prays and fasts. We’re making our own preparation, our own “spring training,” if you will, as we commence our own journey towards eternal life. This season of Lent is a time of repentance and a time of conversion. We are challenged to leave behind sinful ways, to set aside whatever would separate us from God. We are called to turn back to the Lord, to turn with him as he sets his face toward Jerusalem.

My friends, dear catechumens and candidates, you have embarked on this journey in a special way. You are preparing to enter communion with the Catholic Church, and over these past weeks and months you have been praying and learning about the faith that was handed on to us by the apostles. You have chosen to embrace the faith of Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene, Augustine, Francis, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and countless others who have gone before us. You are courageously joining the ranks of brothers and sisters who became martyrs, witnesses of faith who gave their lives for Christ over the centuries. You are also joining the countless ordinary believers through the ages who don’t have famous names, but who have striven to follow Christ in the ordinary ways of daily life since the day he called his very first followers.

This is a time for conversion, once again for turning back to our Lord, and believe me, we all need conversion. Whether you have been a Catholic all your life, or you’re just now professing the Catholic faith for the first time, we’re all in need of conversion. When Jesus entered the desert, he was confronted by temptations to sin. The devil wanted to steer him away from the path that his Father had sent him to travel. He tried to get Jesus to be less than he was and to slide onto the path of sin. But Jesus stood his ground and fought off these temptations. To every suggestion of the devil, Jesus responded with a command of God from the Scriptures. “One does not live on bread alone, but on every word from the mouth of God... You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test The Lord, your God, shall you worship, and him alone

shall you serve.” He kept his face turned toward his Father, and didn’t allow himself to be turned away.

In our lifetimes, we are tempted and enticed on a daily basis, and sometimes we fall, we sin. So yes, we’re all in need of conversion. Just after he was elected as pope, Pope Francis was asked in an interview, “Who is Pope Francis?” And he replied very simply, “He is a sinner who has received the mercy of God.” So you see, you’re in good company! We are all sinners, and we are all recipients of the mercy of God. Some of you will soon be baptized, washed clean of every vestige of sin. Some of you will experience the mercy of God in the sacrament of reconciliation, and all of you will be confirmed in the power of the Holy Spirit. And finally, you will come forward to the altar to receive our Lord in the Eucharist, the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ. Along with every other member of the Church, you too will be blessed with the saving mercy of Jesus, who prepares the way for all of us, so we might have a place with him in heaven.

I want you to know, my brothers and sisters, that you are members now of this family that we call the Church, a family that stretches from one end of the globe to the other, that includes people of every nation and language. The word catholic means universal, and the Church truly is that; it is made up of sinners who by God’s mercy desire to be saints. I can assure you that we are on the same journey you are on, and now we will walk together, washed by the waters of baptism, anointed by the Spirit, and nourished by the body and blood of our Lord. It’s a joyful journey, and I am happy to welcome you along. As you prepare for your own entrance into the Church, know that you are in my prayers, and in the prayers of the faithful all over the world. We are here to support and encourage you, and we are glad you have chosen to join us. And always remember what Paul tells us: the grace of God in Christ Jesus is overflowing for us all.