

**Pulled Quote:** “We are not isolated individuals but members of his Body, in a personal and intimate relationship with him, and in spiritual communion with each other. We are all part of his Church, which exists by his design, by his founding, and by his sustaining grace.” –Bishop John Folda

**Headline: The Church: Body of Christ, People of God**

Towards the end of his time on earth, Jesus assured his apostles: “I will be with you always, even until the end of the age.” One of the ways that our Lord fulfills this promise is through his Church. Much has happened in the Church in recent months, most notably news surrounding the clergy abuse scandals. Additionally, the Pope and several hundred bishops met last fall for a synod in Rome to consider the vocation of young people. Here in Fargo, we held a Convocation of Parish Leaders to build up a culture of missionary discipleship in our diocese.

Sometimes when we read or hear the word “church,” we think of buildings and activities, or perhaps of popes, clergy, or sisters. We think of the Church as an institution. However, St. Paul teaches us that the Church is the Body of Christ; he is the head and we are the members. The Church as the Body of Christ, therefore, is inseparable from the person of Jesus. However, many see the Church as somehow separate or standing apart from Christ, usually when there is dissatisfaction with the Church. But, Pope Francis has taught very clearly that one cannot even think of the Church apart from Christ, and one cannot think of Christ apart from the Church. Jesus and the Church are one, because he has made it so.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ dwells within his Church and in each of its members, a communion of grace that unites us with him and with one another. The Second Vatican Council calls the Church the “universal sacrament” of Christ. In other words, the Church is a sign and instrument of his living presence in the world through the proclamation of the Word, through the celebration of the sacraments, and through the holiness of its members.

Through the Church, Christ continues to be active among his people as priest, prophet, and king, that is, by sanctifying, teaching, and shepherding. When we hear the Gospel proclaimed, whether by clergy or laity, Christ is at work in his Church, teaching the faith and imparting the truth. Through the governing actions of the Church, and through her missionary activity, Christ the Good Shepherd is at work, continuing what he began in Galilee and Jerusalem. When the liturgy and sacraments are celebrated, Christ is praying with and through his Church, drawing us into the mystery of his divine life. When we live saintly lives of charity and mercy, Christ walks among us, making his holiness take flesh in the lives of his disciples.

We all know the weakness and sinfulness of the members of the Church. Every member is a sinner who is redeemed and sanctified by Jesus, our Savior. However, we are still sinners in need of continual repentance and conversion. Some look at the sinfulness of the Church’s members, including its clergy, and conclude that the Church itself is sinful. Especially now, with clergy scandals (even though most are from decades ago), there is considerable backlash and resentment towards the Church, especially towards bishops. Some have lost trust and faith in the Church, and some question the holiness of the Church.

It’s important to remember that the holiness of the Church originates in Christ himself, apart from the sinfulness of its members and its leaders. The holiness of the Church has never been contingent on the perfection of its clergy and hierarchy. If that were the case, the Church would have withered away immediately at the Garden of Gethsemane. From the very beginning, the members and leaders of the Church have been weak and sinful. Just think of James and John who sought positions of honor, or Peter who denied Jesus, and the other apostles who abandoned him at his moment of need. All are in need of mercy, and even when the clergy and faithful fail through sin, Jesus still abides within his Church, offering the grace of mercy and renewal. As the Body of Christ, the Church is inseparable from Christ through grace: “I will be with you always, even until the end of the age.” This is most obvious through Word and sacrament. Despite the frailty or sinfulness of the priest or bishop, the Gospel is still preached and the sacraments are still given to the faithful. It’s also true through the witness of the saints. Even at

times in history when the clergy were afflicted with corruption, the faith was handed on through the faithful, and the Church endured and grew.

In times of crisis, God raises up saints to carry out his mission. Now is certainly such a time, though not the first, and Jesus is calling forth those who are willing to be saints, those who will live the faith with integrity and even with heroism. He calls every member of his Body, the Church, to be witnesses now more than ever, because the need is greater. Jesus calls us to be his disciples, his servants, and his friends, and through these callings, he invites us to holiness and forms us to be the saints his Church needs. Note well that our Lord does not call us in isolation. He calls us to be one with him along with many others, a community of faith. We are not isolated individuals but members of his Body, in a personal and intimate relationship with him, and in spiritual communion with each other. We are all part of his Church, which exists by his design, by his founding, and by his sustaining grace. Once again, we cannot think of the Church apart from Christ, and we cannot think of Christ apart from his Church. "I will be with you always, even until the end of the age."