

This column was originally printed in the July/August 2013 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

A new shepherd meets his flock

Bishop John Folda

As I write this column for New Earth, it is exactly one month since my ordination as Bishop of the Diocese of Fargo, and what a month it has been! I am still overwhelmed by memories of the beauty and solemnity of the ordination liturgies at Sts. Anne and Joachim Church and at the Cathedral of St. Mary. Many people from around the diocese and throughout the country have commented on this in phone calls, e-mails, and good old-fashioned letters. Thanks once again to all who played a part in the planning and execution of these wonderful and historic events for our diocese.

So, what is life like for a new bishop? I can't speak for every new bishop, but I can tell you that this bishop has been busy, and I suspect that will continue! These first weeks of my service to the Diocese of Fargo have been marvelous, and I would like to share with all of you a few of the many wonderful experiences I've had.

One of the highlights has been the regional Masses that were celebrated around the diocese to allow me to visit a few of our parishes and meet as many of you as possible. In the week following my ordination, I travelled to Jamestown, Devils Lake and Grand Forks for a dinner with my brother priests, a parish Mass, and a reception afterwards. These were beautiful and joyful events, and I was very touched by the presence of so many priests and people at these regional celebrations. In a certain sense, these occasions allowed me to extend the celebration of my ordination to many more people of our diocese, and I appreciate the opportunity to meet so many of you. I look forward to visiting more of our parishes in the coming months, and in this way I can truly get to know the Diocese of Fargo.

One of my priorities during this first year will also be to meet and get to know our priests, who are my closest and dearest collaborators in service to God's people. I've had the occasion to visit with a number of them personally and socially, and I am already aware of the fraternal bond that joins our priests together in faith. Even after these few weeks, I can discern the dedication and commitment of these good men to the people under their spiritual care, and I have also seen the love that our people have for their priests. Please keep your priests in your prayers, and ask our Lord to strengthen them for the pastoral work he has entrusted to them.

Certainly our deacons also provide an essential service to our diocese. In fact, the word deacon means "servant," and I am impressed by the dedication of these selfless men who joyfully serve our parishes and other apostolates.

I have also received a hearty welcome from our religious sisters. I was invited to celebrate the silver jubilee of one of our sisters in Maryvale at Valley City, and also joined a group of sisters for Mass and lunch this past week here in Fargo. The joy and enthusiasm of these consecrated religious is a great gift to the Church and to our diocese, and we are very blessed by their prayerful witness and apostolic zeal. The upcoming weeks will take me to further encounters with our sisters in Hankinson and Wahpeton, and I am anxious to assure them of my gratitude for their presence in the Diocese of Fargo.

You may be aware that I worked for the past 14 years as a seminary rector, so the seminarians of our diocese have a very special place in my heart. I have already met many of them, and I am filled with hope as I see their open-hearted enthusiasm and their willingness to follow where our Lord is leading. In two weeks, I will join our seminarians for their annual summer gathering in Napoleon, and I look forward to praying and recreating with them. I imagine they will also be somewhat curious about this new bishop who someday might ordain them, so I will try to be ready for their questions!

Other events have included radio interviews with local media, the installation of new officers for the North Dakota Knights of Columbus, a cookout with our Young Disciples teams, attending my first Fargo RedHawks game, and helping to serve the weekly Thursday community dinner at one of our local parishes in West Fargo. Certainly another highlight was my attendance at the Tekakwitha conference in Bismarck sponsored by the Native American parishes of our two dioceses in North Dakota. These and many other activities, along with the inevitable office work, have filled my days, but I have also been getting to know the many good and faithful people who help to carry out the great work of the Church in the Diocese of Fargo, and I am edified by their hard work and quiet dedication.

There is no question that the Diocese of Fargo has been greatly blessed, but it has needs as well, so I am trying to learn as much as I can in order to address these needs in a prudent and prayerful way. I am remembering all of you in my daily prayers and Masses, placing you in the loving hands of our Divine Savior and asking God to assist us as we make our way together through the joys and sorrows of this life toward the eternal joys of heaven.