“This chapel will be the heart of your school, because here you will always find Christ”

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

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Dedication of Chapel and Altar – St. John’s Academy, Jamestown

St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

“Truly the Lord is in this place… How awesome is this shrine! This is nothing but an abode of God, the gateway to heaven.” These words of Jacob in the Book of Genesis certainly describe what we are doing here today. We have come to dedicate this chapel to our Lord, so that it truly will be his shrine, and a gateway to heaven for us. Dear friends, I’m very happy to be with you today for this important occasion, the blessing of the new addition to St. John’s Academy, and the dedication of this new chapel. This has been a labor of love for your parish, and I congratulate you on what you’ve accomplished here. “How awesome is this shrine!”

I’ve said before, and I’ll say again that I believe Catholic education is one of the most important apostolates we have as a church. And the reason should be obvious. Through our Catholic schools we have an opportunity day after day to share the faith with our children. We have the opportunity not only to teach the faith to them, but to live it, and to pray it. For well over a hundred years this school has been educating and forming the young people of this parish and passing along to them the greatest gift we have to give: our faith in Jesus Christ. And while many other Catholic schools have closed their doors over the last few decades, you’ve gone the other direction. You have committed yourself to continuing this apostolate that has been so strongly encouraged by the Church, an apostolate that continues the mission that Jesus gave to his apostles, to go and “make disciples of all peoples.”

And now at the heart of this school is a new chapel, a place of prayer and adoration, a place for your students and teachers to come into the presence of the Lord and experience his nearness and his love. In the Old Testament reading from Nehemiah, the high priest read the Sacred Scripture to the people in the newly dedicated temple, and they wept with joy because they knew they were in the presence of God. And in the Gospel, we find Jesus clearing the temple of Jerusalem. He makes it clear that from then on, he would be the true temple of God, the holy place where God has made his dwelling in the world.

This chapel is an image of that true temple, it is that gateway to heaven that Jacob spoke of, because here we will be able to listen to God’s Word. Here we will be able to celebrate the sacrifice of our Lord. Here we will be able to come and pray, knowing that Jesus is present in the tabernacle, strengthening us, consoling us, and loving us. This beautiful place will be a little piece of heaven come to earth, where we can meet God and where his grace will be available to all who are part of this wonderful school.

There are many parts to this beautiful rite of dedication. We will sprinkle the walls and the people as a sign of purification. We will anoint the walls to remind us that this is not just another room; it is consecrated, set aside and made holy for worship. We will light candles as a sign of Christ, who is the light of the world. And most importantly, we will anoint and consecrate the altar. A Catholic church can do without many things: stations of the cross, stained glass windows, statues. But it cannot do without an altar. The altar is that sacred place where the sacrifice of the Cross is offered to the Father. It is made present to us once again, and we partake
of that sacrifice. There is even a saying in the tradition of the Church that “the altar is Christ.” Upon this altar, Jesus offers himself for us and to us through the Eucharistic liturgy. He invites us to draw near and to enter into his life, to become one with him. Just as he invited his apostles to come and remain with him, he now will invite the teachers, students, and all the faithful to come, to worship, and to abide in his love. He offers us the fullness of his humanity and his divinity, so that we might be one with him. And it’s only by accepting his invitation, by drawing near to him in the moment of his love and sacrifice, that we will become the children of God that we were made to be by our Father.

This ritual of dedication is filled with beautiful symbolism. Just as Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit, this altar will be anointed with sacred chrism to show that it is consecrated, set apart for the sacred mysteries. And just as incense is an image of God’s blessing and of our prayers rising up to him, so the incense upon this altar and around the Gospel at the ambo will remind us of God’s presence and of our prayers ascending to his throne. On this altar, bread and wine will be offered to the Father, and through the words of our Lord in the consecration, heaven and earth will meet in the sacrament of the Eucharist. In that sacrament, our Lord invites us to remain in him, to receive his Body and Blood as a pledge of the eternal life he won for us.

My friends, this chapel really will be the heart of your school, because here you will always find Christ. He is the reason for all that we are doing here today and every day. He will allow St. John’s to grow and thrive, to be a place where every child can learn of God’s love and the beautiful call we have all received to be with him in heaven. I pray that our Lord will always bless this historic school, this place where the faith can be handed on to many more generations of young people. “How awesome is this shrine! This is nothing but an abode of God, the gateway to heaven.”