“Jesus continues to send us, commission us to live our faith and share the faith”

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

September 26, 2020

St. Michael Church – Pingree – Closing Mass

St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

Dear brothers and sisters, I’m glad to be with you to celebrate this final Mass here at St. Michael’s Church. I know that you all care about your parish and that you made the request to close your church only after much discussion and prayer. Of course, it’s always a little sad to see a parish close. As I have said many times, I have great reverence for the small, rural parishes of our diocese, and I was privileged to serve as pastor of several such parishes before I became your bishop. I know the many good fruits that have come from the life of this parish, but I also understand the challenge of sustaining a parish with a declining number of members, and I am grateful for all the efforts you have made in these last years to keep your parish alive and active.

On this occasion, two different thoughts come to mind. First, thanksgiving, and second, a resolution to persevere in faith. First, it is fitting to thank God for the many ways he has touched the lives of so many through the life of this parish church. For more than a hundred years, St. Michael’s has served the people of God in this area. Just consider the number of children baptized, the number of Masses celebrated, the many penitents who have come to have their sins forgiven, the number of husbands and wives joined in marriage, the number of young people who have been taught the faith in this parish. Even though it has always been a small parish relative to many others, it is still a place where God’s grace has been powerfully at work, where the angels adore in the presence of our Lord. A great number of souls have been blessed by their association with St. Michael’s parish, including your own, and that will not end today. God will continue to touch us with his love, wherever we are, wherever we gather to worship him, to hear his Gospel proclaimed and to receive the grace of the sacraments.

Our second thought should be a determination to keep the flame of faith alive in our hearts and in our lives. Discipleship requires commitment, and readiness to move forward no matter the cost. Jesus himself “set his face toward Jerusalem” and accepted the cross that awaited him there. As St. John tells us in the second reading today, “The victory that conquers the world is our faith. Who indeed is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” As we just heard in the Gospel, when Nathanael was introduced to Jesus, he believed and put his faith in him: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” He didn’t hold back, he didn’t hedge his bets, he threw in his lot with Jesus and persevered to the end. And along with the other apostles, he went out into the world strengthened by that same faith, and shared the Gospel with as many people as he possibly could.

My friends, Jesus continues to send us, commission us to live our faith and share the faith with others. He asked Peter and Paul and the other apostles, to set out on new paths and to trust in him, and they did. Our Lord continually opened new doors and revealed new paths to them, so that their faith might grow and his mission might continue. Because of their faith and courage, the Catholic faith has been passed along through generations even to our own time. That is true right here in your parish and in your own families. The seeds of faith were planted by your ancestors and by the founding members of St. Michael’s. The gift of faith has been passed along,
and we must continue to give that gift to others as well. Our work is not done, but now takes a new direction.

It’s always disappointing when a church has to close. Some might think it’s a good idea, and others might disagree. None of us can turn back time and change the decline in numbers that leads to this moment. But at a certain point, change is necessary. Parishes have come and gone in the history of the Church and in the history of this diocese, but the faith of the people who belong to those parishes endures. I don’t need to tell you that the Church is more than a building. It is built on Christ, it is sustained by the Gospel and the Holy Eucharist and all the sacraments, and it will continue to the end of time, because Jesus promised that it would. When he established the Church on Peter and the apostles, he promised that he himself would sustain it, and that the gates of death would not overcome it. And that is the source of our hope—that Christ sustains his Church and will never abandon it.

And that’s exactly why we must carry on, trusting in the grace of Jesus within his Church. As we close this chapter in the life of your parish, there are fond memories and maybe some sadness too. But I hope there is also determination to keep alive this gift of faith that Jesus has given us, and not just to keep it but to live it and share it. I thank God for the grace that he has given to his people through this parish, and I thank God for you, the people of St. Michael’s. For many years you have shown your love for our Lord, and for his Church. You have loved your parish, and you have loved one another. I know that love will continue. I thank God for the many ways that he has been at work among you and those who came before you. As you continue now in a different parish community, the Church will need you to be active and zealous, just as you have been here. Bring your faith, your talents, and all that you are to Christ in his Church, and he will continue to bring forth many new blessings among us. As Jesus said to Nathanael, “You will see greater things than this…. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Our Lord will still amaze us, and you can count on St. Michael, your heavenly patron, to accompany you and protect you as you continue your journey of faith.