

No matter what our state in life is, we all have a part to play in the mission of Christ's Church. –
Bishop John T. Folda

The mission of the Church

In 1993 I was appointed as a pastor for the first time in Syracuse, Neb., and I remember noticing a brass plaque in the back of the church. It said that St. Paulinus Church had been built with the help of contributions from the Catholic Extension Society, a national organization that supports the mission of the Church in needy areas of the United States. I thought about the many people from places all around the country who had contributed to building that church, and many others besides. I realized in a personal way how important it is to support the mission of the Church, especially in places where the Church lacks resources and priests.

For three days in September, I had the opportunity to meet with about 65 other bishops from the United States at a gathering sponsored by Catholic Extension. Our time together renewed my awareness of the Church's ongoing mission, even as it is carried out in places that are both needy and often very remote. Like every diocese in this country, the history of the Diocese of Fargo was also written through the generous work and material contributions of countless benefactors who actively supported the mission of the Church in North Dakota. I've seen plaques in churches right here in our own diocese that commemorate the contributions of Catholic Extension and many others who supported the mission of the Church in this corner of the world when we needed outside help. From the earliest days of the Catholic Church in North Dakota, we have been assisted by missionaries—priests, religious, and laity—who came to the northern plains and shared the gift of faith with those who lived here. And a multitude of others made material contributions that allowed our parish churches and schools to rise up on the prairies. John Patrick Shanley, our founding bishop, constantly sought assistance from missionaries and benefactors who would help him build up the Church in our diocese, and all of his successors have continued those efforts.

The Church is by nature missionary. In fact, it is said that the Church doesn't have a mission, it is a mission. It is sent out into the world by Christ, just as he sent out his first followers, to proclaim the Kingdom of God. "Go and make disciples of all nations..." There are thousands of Catholic missionaries who still go out into the world today, bringing the Gospel to the most remote areas and to places where the Catholic faith is barely known. Just as missionaries came here to plant seeds of faith, so do they still share that same faith with brothers and sisters around the world. Their work isn't easy. In fact, it can be quite dangerous, and every year we hear of faithful missionaries who have died in service to Christ, true martyrs for the faith.

Even though our diocesan Church is now well established, we shouldn't assume that the work of missionaries is completed. We are still blessed by the presence of missionary priests from Africa, Asia, and Europe who serve in our parishes. We still find among us religious sisters who left their homelands in order to serve in North Dakota, a place many of them had never heard of. And we have young adults who come every year to work with our own young people in schools, parishes, and college campuses. I think especially of the great missionaries of FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) who serve at UND and NDSU, as well as the National Evangelization Team (NET) missionaries who visit our parishes and schools to witness the faith to our youth. And we still need material support as well, especially in places where resources are meager and parishes struggle to make ends meet.

Ever since his election as our Holy Father, Pope Francis has drawn attention to the essential mission of the Church, and he has taught us that every one of us, by virtue of our baptism, is called to be a missionary disciple of Jesus Christ. In other words, as baptized followers of Jesus, we are sent—missioned—into the world as his witnesses. Some assume that missionaries must be priests or religious sisters or brothers, but the very fact of our baptism configures us to Christ, who was sent by his Father as our Redeemer. Now he, in turn, sends us into the world to continue his work. No matter what our state in life is, we all have a part to play in the mission of Christ's Church.

It's also important to realize that the Diocese of Fargo hasn't only been on the receiving end of the Church's mission. We have contributed to that mission by sending candidates to religious orders who serve in various places around our nation and the world. We have sent a growing number of young people who now serve as missionaries on college campuses across the country. In fact, some of our own priests were campus missionaries before they entered the seminary. We have made our own material contributions to the missionary work of the Church all over the world. I'm constantly edified by the generous support of the faithful in our diocese for the Church in need, places of great poverty, places that have suffered natural disasters, and places that could not build their own parish churches without the help of others.

We must always remember the mission of the Church, which is to make Christ known and present in every land and among all peoples. By our material support, we make it possible for our brothers and sisters here and abroad to worship God and live the faith as we do. And by our prayers, we sustain those who "put out into the deep" and take the Gospel of Christ to the far reaches of the earth. Once again, we all have a part to play in the mission of Christ and his Church.