

# Go, Make Disciples

A Pastoral Letter to the Faithful of the Diocese of Fargo



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Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

February 2, 2026

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“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

### Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. I greet you with joy in the words of St. Paul: “I continually thank God for you because of the favor he has bestowed on you in Christ Jesus...” (1 Cor 1:4). With thanksgiving to God, I address this Pastoral Letter to all the faithful in the Diocese of Fargo, and I ask our Lord to bestow his blessing upon us. The past several years have been marked by significant events and moments of grace. We recently completed a three-year Eucharistic Revival throughout our nation, which culminated in both a national and diocesan Eucharistic Congress. We just concluded a Jubilee Year with the theme “Pilgrims of Hope.” We mourned the passing of Pope Francis and rejoiced in the election of Pope Leo XIV, the first pope from the United States. And by many accounts we have seen an upsurge in the number of those entering the Church.

#### *Third Synod of the Diocese of Fargo*

2. On the Solemnity of Corpus Christi on June 19, 2022, I announced the Third Synod of the Diocese of Fargo, and with your help we began a period of consultation and preparation. After numerous listening sessions around the diocese and responses to surveys sent out to our parishes, I convoked a synodal assembly of representatives from our entire diocese in April 2024. Throughout the course of our Synod, the delegates listened to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and spoke from their hearts on the needs of the Church in our diocese. I once again offer my sincere thanks to all who gave their input and participated actively in our Synod, which was truly a moment of grace in the life of the Diocese of Fargo. After much prayer and discussion, the Synod adopted a number of proposals for my consideration and for the good of our diocesan Church. Based on those proposals and my own discernment regarding the life of our diocese, I offer you this Pastoral Letter, “Go, Make Disciples.” It is my hope that this letter will give direction to our diocese for the coming years, realizing that in all things we are guided by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

3. Our diocesan Synod was organized under three principal themes: Encounter, Formation, and Mission. The Synod delegates recognized and affirmed that all the faithful of our diocese are called to an encounter and a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ; all are called to be formed by the Gospel in the richness of our Catholic faith; and all are called to be witnesses and missionary disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

## I. Encounter

“‘Rabbi, where are you staying?’ ‘Come and you will see’” (Jn 1:38-39).

4. During his pontificate, Pope Francis often quoted a statement of his predecessor of happy memory, Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1). That person is, of course, Jesus Christ. Our Christian faith has its origin in a personal encounter with the incarnate Son of God, the Word become flesh who dwells among us (cf. Jn 1:14). Pope Francis stated even more emphatically: “Christian faith is either an encounter with him alive, or it does not exist” (*Desiderio desideravi*, 10). Indeed, the life of our diocese and of every Christian is built upon this personal encounter, and a personal encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ is the foundation of our life and mission as the Church.

### *Our Encounter with Christ in the Eucharist*

5. The Second Vatican Council teaches that the sacrament of the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of the life of the Church” (*Lumen gentium*, 11). Through the Eucharist, we enter into the Paschal Mystery of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, his entire act of redemption. And so, the Eucharist must be paramount in the life and activity of our diocesan Church. The celebration of our Lord’s sacrifice in the Mass is essential to the life of the Church and the life of every member of the faithful. Without the Eucharist, we are impoverished and deprived of the life-giving Body and Blood of Christ, which Jesus gave to his disciples at the Last Supper and continues to give in every celebration of the Mass.

6. Pope St. John Paul II taught that “the Church draws her life from the Eucharist” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 1). And Jesus himself teaches in the great discourse on the Bread of Life: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6: 54, 56). For this reason, the primacy of the Eucharist in the life of our diocese must always be a priority, and every effort must be made to invite and welcome the People of God into the Eucharistic life of the Church.

### *The Lord’s Day*

7. “On the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb...” (Lk 24:1). “Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is the principal day for the celebration of the Eucharist because it is the day of the Resurrection. It is the preeminent day of the liturgical assembly, the day of the Christian family, and the day of joy and rest from work. Sunday is ‘the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1193; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106).

8. The celebration of the Mass, the Paschal Mystery of our Lord’s death and resurrection, is essential to the life of the Church. In the Sunday celebration, the entire family of the faithful is called to gather as the People of God and as the Body of Christ in prayer and worship of our Lord. From the earliest days of the Church, Christians gathered on Sunday to recall with joy the Lord’s resurrection and to participate in the “breaking of bread,” a reference to the celebration of the Eucharist. (cf. Acts 20:7). Sunday is the Lord’s Day, and we manifest our communion with him most vividly by our participation in the Sunday liturgy, both for the proclamation of the Word of God and for the celebration of the Eucharist.

9. It is widely observed that attendance at Sunday Mass (including the vigil Mass of Saturday evening) has declined significantly in recent years. What was once the key event in the weekly life of every Catholic is now seen as one among many options. In recent decades, the calls of entertainment, commerce, and sometimes employment, have diminished our awareness that Sunday is first and foremost the Lord's Day. Now, unfortunately, our obligation to worship is too often supplanted by other pursuits and activities, or it is forgotten altogether.

10. It is important to recall that no Catholic is exempt from the obligation to attend and participate in Mass on Sunday, except those who are unable to attend because of health, incapacity, family need, inclement weather, or another serious reason. As with every obligation we receive from God, this obligation to worship is for our spiritual enrichment and for our eternal salvation. To absent ourselves and our families from the celebration of Sunday Mass is to be deprived of the most powerful and grace-filled gift of God to his Church: the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist. No athletic or school-related activity, no family gathering or vacation, no agricultural or commercial activity, or any other priority, can replace the centrality of our obligation to worship God on the Lord's Day at Mass.

11. Parents in a particular way have a serious responsibility to ensure that their entire family is able to participate in Sunday Mass. In this way, they inculcate in their children the spiritual sense of our relationship with God and his love for us. Our regular celebration of Mass, ideally as a family, is a clear demonstration of the priority of God in our lives. However, if we regularly choose other pursuits on the Lord's Day, we explicitly teach our children that God has less importance in our lives and the Eucharist is secondary to other activities. If parents fail to assure their children's participation in the Sunday Eucharist, they can expect that their children will be even less inclined to participate in the life of the Church when they reach adulthood and have children of their own.

12. We must remember, however, that our participation in the Mass is not merely an obligation, but a gift and a privilege. The celebration of the Lord's sacrifice at Mass is, indeed, a pathway to heaven, because it draws us already into the divine life of God. The Mass unites us with Christ in a singular way that has no substitute. We can never marvel enough at the great gift that has been given to the Church in the Eucharistic liturgy, wherein we hear the Word of God proclaimed and enter into the mystery of our Lord's death and resurrection through the Eucharist. Even within the limitations of our earthly liturgies and those who participate in them, God generously reaches down to earth and chooses to be present among us in grace. With this in mind, I invite all the faithful in the Diocese of Fargo to rediscover the beauty of Christ's presence through participation in the Eucharist on every Sunday and Holy Day. I also urge our entire diocesan family to renew our commitment to Sunday as the Lord's Day, a day dedicated first and foremost to the worship of God through the sacrifice of the Mass.

### *Confirmation and First Eucharist*

13. The celebrations of the sacraments of initiation are profound moments of encounter with God's grace in the life of every believer, and in a special way, in the lives of young people. For more than twenty years in the Diocese of Fargo, the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist for children and young people have been celebrated concurrently within the same liturgy. While this practice has become customary in our diocese, many have expressed a desire to celebrate these sacraments separately. In particular, there have been persistent requests for the celebration of First Eucharist to take place in the home parish of the first communicants. Concerns have also

been raised, by some parents, pastors, and catechists, that more time is needed for catechetical preparation of children for the sacrament of Confirmation. This desire for more thorough preparation of children for the sacrament of Confirmation is made difficult by the joint celebration of these two sacraments of initiation at a young age.

14. The delegates of the diocesan Synod expressed their preference that the so-called restored order of the sacraments should be retained, that is, the celebration of Confirmation followed by the celebration of First Holy Eucharist. However, the Synod also recommended that these sacramental celebrations should occur on separate occasions in order to give due attention to both. This would either require the celebration of Confirmation at an even earlier age or the celebration of First Eucharist at a later age, for example, fourth grade. In my judgment, neither of these options seems advisable.

15. Beginning in the spring of 2027, the sacraments of First Holy Eucharist and Confirmation for children will be celebrated separately throughout the Diocese of Fargo. First Holy Communion will be celebrated in third grade in the home parish of the first communicants. The sacrament of Confirmation will be celebrated in the following year, that is, in fourth grade. The bishop will continue to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation in parish clusters, as has been our practice in recent years.

16. The current order of the sacraments acknowledges that the Eucharist is the fulness of initiation into the Christian life. It is an ideal that reflects the Church's practice for the initiation of adults. However, my observation as a bishop, and previously as a parish priest, leads me to conclude that children and young people will benefit from two distinct celebrations. They will have more opportunity to absorb the uniqueness of each sacrament and comprehend to a greater degree the sacramental grace they are receiving. While this change will alter the current practice, it will allow for distinct celebrations of these two sacraments, allowing young people to experience each in its own solemnity and beauty. Children and families will be able to celebrate First Eucharist in their home parishes. Catechists and parents will have additional time to prepare children for the sacrament of Confirmation.

17. The liturgies of the sacraments of initiation are, in my experience, powerful evangelical and catechetical moments both for the young people who receive them and for the family members and faithful who participate. I have observed that the ideal of celebrating these sacraments together is often overshadowed by the challenge it poses to the young people who receive them. It is my hope that the new practice to be implemented throughout our diocese will reinforce the unique grace of each of the sacraments for the children and for those who prepare them.

18. I believe this practice can also find justification in the experience of the apostles themselves, who first received Christ in the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and subsequently received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Having entered into personal communion with Jesus through his self-gift in the Eucharist, they were then given the grace of the Holy Spirit that would confirm and equip them for the mission that they had received when Jesus sent them out in the world as his witnesses. In a similar way, those who receive the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist and experience personal communion with him will then be blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit through the sacrament of Confirmation so they, too, may be faithful disciples and witnesses of Jesus Christ in the world.

19. Some have proposed an even later celebration of Confirmation for young people. This is common in certain parts of the country and would, of course, allow for even more time for

preparation. However, I am convinced that the grace of Confirmation is essential as young people grow into adolescence and face the challenges of our secularized culture. In my judgment, it would be detrimental to further delay Confirmation and deprive our young people of these graces as they grow up into adolescence and adulthood. Experience demonstrates, too, that undue delay in receiving Confirmation often results in a failure to receive the sacrament at all. I have also observed that other dioceses around our country are choosing to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation at an earlier age. I pray that this revised arrangement of the sacraments of initiation in the Diocese of Fargo will be a blessing for our young people and for our diocesan Church.

### *The Parish as a Place of Encounter*

20. For most of us, the parish is the principal place, the spiritual home, where our faith is fostered and nourished. We participate in the liturgy, we receive teaching and formation, and we are sent forth to live our faith and carry out the mission of the Church. But all of this begins with our encounter with Jesus Christ, the person-to-person meeting of hearts that brings us into a relationship of loving friendship with God. The parish, which is a spiritual home and a family of faith, is also a place of encounter. In the parish we meet our Lord in prayer, worship, teaching, charity, and apostolate. Gathered together as a community of believers, a family of spiritual brothers and sisters, we meet Jesus in much the same way as the first believers, the apostles whom Jesus gathered around himself. It is true that our encounter with Jesus happens in a very personal way, sometimes hidden even from those who know us best. And yet, the parish, like the community of apostles and disciples gathered around our Lord, is the place where we meet him regularly and come to know him intimately. Surrounded by brothers and sisters who have also been invited to communion with him, we encounter the One who loves us and shares the divine life of God with us.

21. The parish is not an extraneous aspect of the life of the Church, but a necessary realization of our Lord's call to community. Jesus did not call his followers and then send them away to live in isolation from one another. He gathered them to himself and gathered them with each other. The members of the early Church "devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In a similar way, he calls us together so that we may, as a community, live in his grace and his truth. The parish is a fundamental cell in the body of the diocesan church where all the faithful can experience our Lord's love and the love of a local spiritual family. No parish is without imperfections, but every parish is a place where the grace of God is at work and our Lord Jesus calls us to unity in charity. To put it simply, the parish is a place where we come to know God and love him more deeply.

22. There are some members of the Church who hold back from actively participating in parish life, or who are not registered as members of any particular parish. It is certainly possible for them to encounter our Lord and grow in faith without formal parish membership. However, they deprive themselves of the important communal life that Jesus desires for us, and they deprive the parish community of their presence and their gifts. Every parish should be a place where the members and visitors too may encounter Jesus Christ. And every parish should examine how this may happen more fully, as well as any obstacles that would hinder such an encounter.

### *The Encounter of Eucharistic Adoration*

23. A singular experience of our encounter with Christ is through the practice of Eucharistic adoration. One of the great strengths of the Diocese of Fargo is widespread devotion to our

Eucharistic Lord and the practice of Eucharistic adoration. The desire to rest in the presence of the Lord is most fully satisfied by receiving him in Holy Communion. But that desire for communion with him persists, and we are moved to seek him out in prayer, especially prayer before his presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Our recognition of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist leads us to worship and adoration, for we know by faith that we are in the presence of the Son of God. Many have discovered the peace that comes with such Eucharistic adoration, and they come to a greater intimacy with him. By our prayer in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord, we prolong the fruits of the sacrifice of the Mass and the reception of Holy Communion. Eucharistic adoration can be an opportunity to encounter Christ in a new and profound way and to deepen our relationship with him.

24. A significant number of parishes in our diocese have an admirable program of regular Eucharistic adoration. This is a fruit of our Eucharistic faith and should be fostered. I ask that regular opportunities for Eucharistic adoration be made available in every parish of our diocese. This can take whatever form is most suitable and feasible in each individual parish, but it should be a regular feature of parish life everywhere.

25. Eucharistic adoration is uniquely experienced in times of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. This is a privileged and sublime occasion to gaze upon our Eucharistic Lord, and the custom of Eucharistic exposition should be maintained and even expanded wherever possible. However, adoration of our Lord in the Eucharist does not require exposition and need not be limited to those specific occasions. Our Lord is just as present to us when we approach the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, and these times of prayer can be immensely fruitful.

26. It is most appropriate that reflection on the Sacred Scriptures, the Word of God, should accompany our times of adoration before the Eucharist, the Word Incarnate. These times of prayer can be individual or communal. To our prayer of adoration we may add intercession for the Church, for our families, for our nation, for peace, for vocations, and for every conceivable need. Eucharistic prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament can only enrich the life of individual believers as well as the parish and the entire diocesan Church. In a recent video conference with young people, Pope Leo XIV said, “During Eucharistic adoration, you can look at Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and know that he looks at you – and he looks at you with love” (National Catholic Youth Conference, Nov. 21, 2025).

#### *Retreat as Encounter*

27. During his earthly life, Jesus took every opportunity to step away from the crowds so that he could spend time with his Father in prayer. He expressed a need for solitude in the Father’s presence so that he could carry out the mission his Father had given him. Jesus “retreated” from the noise and activity of the world so that he could rest in the silence of his Father’s presence and his love. And we have that same need. Just as Jesus needed time for spiritual renewal, so too do we. In fact, Jesus led his disciples away for time apart so they too could experience this spiritual renewal. “Come away by yourselves ... and rest awhile” (Mk 6:31). In his presence, they could encounter God more personally, without distraction and interruption. And from the early days of the Church, faithful Christians have stepped back from the pressures of daily life in order to be spiritually renewed in the presence of our Lord.

28. The Diocese of Fargo has a long history of retreat ministry, and this practice of retreat has borne abundant fruit in the lives of the faithful, for both adults and young people. But as our

world and culture grow more secularized and more distant from God, it becomes even more important that we seek out regular and extended times of spiritual rest and renewal. It is my hope that an even greater number of the faithful will take the opportunity for a regular retreat with our Lord. Annual retreats organized in our parishes can be a source of blessing for the entire parish family. We make time in our lives for many activities. A day or a few days set aside for prayer and reflection is a choice that we can also make that will potentially bear abundant fruit in our own spiritual lives. Retreat opportunities in our diocese are plentiful, and I invite everyone to take advantage of these opportunities for a time of encounter with our Lord, an encounter that can grow into something more. A retreat is not only for the select few or for the “spiritual elite.” Retreats are appropriate for every person who desires a deeper relationship with God.

### *Encountering God in Silence*

29. Our world and our culture have become so filled with sound and activity that we often fail to notice the presence of God or his voice in our hearts. Jesus sought the quiet of solitude so he could enter more fully into communion with his Father. Silence and stillness of heart are sometimes in short supply, especially for those who have busy personal and family lives. But following our Lord’s example in accord with our own particular states of life, we must all cultivate moments of silence in order to become aware of God’s presence and to hear his voice speaking to us. Even in brief moments of quiet, we can recollect ourselves and recall the presence of God, who is always with us. In these moments, we encounter our Lord more personally, and have an opportunity to share with him our joys and sorrows, our hopes and our needs. We hear not only our own voices or the sounds of the passing world, but the quiet voice of God who speaks to all who will listen.

30. The gift of silence is also important in the celebration of the liturgy. When we enter the church, we enter into the “Holy of Holies,” the sanctuary where our Lord is uniquely present. Some moments of quiet prayer before the celebration of Mass allow us to recollect ourselves and prepare for the sacred mystery about to unfold before us. Pastors should ensure that during every Mass, some moments of silence are observed so that all who are present may peacefully contemplate the extraordinary grace of the celebration. Times of silent recollection may occur between or after the scriptural readings, after the homily, during the preparation of the gifts and altar, or after Holy Communion. Certainly, after Communion or after Mass is concluded, it is fitting to pause in silence for a moment of thanksgiving. Without prejudice to the joy and celebration inherent in the liturgy, sacred silence is also suited to the liturgy and can be a profound moment of encounter with our Lord for the individual and for the entire assembly of the faithful.

## II. Formation

“All the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them” (Jn 8:2).

31. After Jesus called his first followers, and after their encounter with him, he invited them to be his companions and to simply spend time with him. They walked where he walked, they heard his preaching, and they witnessed the miraculous signs of his divine power. He drew them to himself so that he could form them as his disciples. Even after an extended period of time, there was much that his disciples still did not understand. And yet, Jesus was patient with them and continued to open up to them the mysteries of our salvation. He taught them, he gave them example by his own actions, and he challenged their earthly way of thinking and acting. Moreover, he assured them that after he was no longer walking the earth with them, the Holy Spirit would continue to teach them all they would need to know (Jn 14:16-17, 25-26). In fact, he formed them as witnesses and authoritative teachers, so that they could then share with the world what they had received: “Whoever hears you hears me” (Lk 10:16).

32. Every follower of Christ, like the apostles themselves, is called into a relationship with our Lord that entails formation in the mysteries of salvation. Through the Sacred Scriptures, through Sacred Tradition, and through the teachings of the Magisterium of the Church, our Lord continues to form his people as disciples and as citizens of heaven. Every day, he imparts to us the grace we need to grow in our love for God and our understanding of his truth. This process of formation does not end when we are children, but continues throughout our lives. As his followers and friends, he invites us to know him and to be one with him, but this union comes about over time with prayer, study, and faithful living of the Christian life.

33. Formation in the Christian life is a necessary part of our lives as disciples of Christ and as Catholics. Every one of us has need of ongoing formation and growth in our adherence to Christ and his teachings. This is why the Church dedicates so much time and energy to the ministry of teaching and faith formation both for young people and adults. This formation is especially important for the lay faithful, who often do not have the opportunity to receive a comprehensive religious education during their youth. As they live their lives in the world, they need a firm grounding in the truths of our faith and in the person of Jesus Christ.

34. A great need of our time is fuller catechesis both for adults and young people. The Synod recognized that many of our adult faithful are inadequately formed in the fundamentals of our faith, especially in contemporary issues and moral questions. For this reason, the Synod identified adult faith formation and catechesis as a priority for our diocese. One obvious example of inadequate catechesis is the misunderstanding that many Catholics in our nation have of the Church’s belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Our ongoing Eucharistic Revival has vigorously addressed this gap in the faith of our brothers and sisters, but additional effort is needed.

35. Research has also demonstrated a lack of understanding in other areas as well, for example, the nature of marriage, issues surrounding artificial contraception and fertility treatments, the sacredness of sexuality, Catholic social teaching, the priesthood, and more. This lack of understanding can be traced back to inadequate catechesis as well as diminished participation in the life of the Church, where such teaching is passed on.

36. To respond, at least in part, to the need for better adult faith formation in our diocese, I have directed our diocesan staff to develop the Catholic Formation Initiative in the Diocese of Fargo.

This initiative will offer ongoing programs of catechesis in specific areas of our faith, both through in-person and remote instruction. Catechetical programs will be offered by diocesan personnel, but I also ask every pastor to arrange for regular and frequent programs of adult faith formation in their parishes as well. The Catholic Formation Initiative will provide resources for local faith formation programs and links to other resources that are available throughout the Church, both here and abroad.

### *Christian Formation at Home*

37. Prayer should be a part of daily life in every home. Prayer time with one's spouse, prayer with parents and children gathered together, and personal prayer, too, are profoundly formative. The family and home, as the domestic church, is a place where God is present to us at every moment, and where his grace is constantly at work. Ordinary Catholic devotional practices, such as meal prayers, blessings of the home and the family, and observance of feast days and liturgical seasons, deepen our awareness of God's nearness and our nearness to him. Works of charity for neighbors, for the poor, for the elderly, and within the family, become a living and practical instruction in the Christian life. A vibrant life of faith in the home reinforces our conviction that our relationship with God is not only a reality for church on Sunday but for all times and places.

38. Every home should have a Catholic edition of the Bible, so that the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures can be known and cherished. In fact, I invite every household to open the Sacred Scriptures each day both for reading and prayer. Daily reflection on the Word of God not only fosters a personal encounter and relationship with our Lord, but it also deepens our understanding of his sacred truth and the grace that binds us together. The great Scripture scholar St. Jerome challenges us when he says, "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (*Commentariorum in Isaiam*, xviii). The core of our Scripture reflection should always be the Holy Gospels, but the entire corpus of Sacred Scripture is an inexhaustible source for reflection and spiritual growth. Excellent Scripture resources are more available now than ever before, and these can be a great help to our formation, understanding, and prayer.

39. In a similar way, every home should have a copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This landmark resource was described by Pope St. John Paul II as "a full, complete exposition of Catholic doctrine, enabling everyone to know what the Church professes, celebrates, lives, and prays in her daily life" (*Laetamur Magnopere*). The *Catechism*, or a similar compendium or summary version, is an important resource for our reference, study, and meditation. It can help us come to a deeper understanding of the riches of our faith, and it offers answers to many of our everyday questions. Personal study of the faith is a key part of our formation as faithful disciples of Christ.

### *The Parish as a Place of Formation*

40. The parish as a community of faith is a center of formation for its members, and for others as well. The parish provides religious education for children and youth, helping parents in their duty as the first teachers of faith. The parish is the place where most young people will receive the sacraments of initiation, and therefore it generally has an established program of sacramental preparation. Our diocese is blessed with a large and dedicated corps of religious educators in our parishes who give their time and talent to pass along the faith to young people. They deserve our thanks and all the support they need to carry out this vital work of the Church.

41. The liturgy is probably the most regular experience of parish life for its members, and the liturgy itself is formative of our faith and our lives as Christians. In the celebrations of the liturgy such as the Mass; the sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, and Matrimony; and rites of Christian burial, we worship God and receive the grace of the Paschal Mystery of our Lord. We are formed in our relationship with God and in our lives of faith by our participation in the liturgy, which is the most important prayer of the Church. Central to that liturgical experience is the proclamation and preaching of the Word of God, which is the revelation of divine truth given to his Church. Whenever the Word of God is proclaimed, the faithful are formed according to the mind and heart of Christ. Their understanding of the faith is deepened, and they are called to virtue and holiness of life.

42. The parish is thus a place of formation not only for children but also for adults, including those who have been members of the Church all their lives. In addition to the liturgy, the parish should be a center of teaching and learning for all its members. The pastor and parochial vicars, along with deacons, parish staff, and volunteers, all have an essential role to play in forming the faithful by offering regular opportunities for further study and enrichment, such as the Order for Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA), Bible studies, catechetical programs, and a variety of other offerings.

43. The life of faith is also formed by the devotional life of believers, especially as this occurs in the context of parish life. Well-known popular practices like the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, devotion to the saints, parish feast day celebrations, and many others, can enrich the lives of the faithful and deepen their sense of connection to God and the saints. Popular devotion in all its variety can reflect the many ways that God's blessing comes to his people and forms a stronger sense of community in the parish.

44. In every dimension of its life and activity, the parish must be a place of formation for its members and for all who participate in its activities. Together, the pastor and the members should evaluate the priorities and plans of the parish to ensure that they always contribute to the formation of its members in the faith that is its foundation. Every parish activity should, in some way, contribute to our formation as friends and disciples of Christ. Like the early Christian community, every parish must form its people in prayer, the sacraments, the Gospel, and in communal life and charity (cf. Acts 2:42).

#### *Formation through Small Groups*

45. During my years as a pastor and now as bishop, I have seen firsthand the value of small groups of the faithful who gather for prayer, faith sharing, and formation in the life of the Church. Groups of individuals from a particular parish or from various parishes will routinely come together for mutual support as they strive to grow in faith and in their relationship with God. A small group can allow individuals to form relationships of friendship and trust with a certain intimacy that might not exist in large scale gatherings. These groups might meet in homes, or at a parish, or in any other useful setting. And a "small group" might be a handful of people or more, depending on the needs and preferences of the members.

46. The Church offers a number of models that many of the faithful already use, and I have seen many of these already utilized in the Diocese of Fargo: Teams of Our Lady for married couples, various Bible study programs, rosary groups, women's groups, men's groups like Cor from the Knights of Columbus, charismatic prayer groups, Cursillo groups, book clubs, and many others. I firmly believe that the model of small group prayer and faith sharing can be an even greater

blessing to our diocese as more of the faithful are able to experience a personal and intimate interaction with our Lord in the company of trusted companions. We can take our lead from Jesus himself, who gathered a small group of followers—the Twelve—for more personal and intense formation. These followers then went out into the world, and they shared with others the fruits of their encounter and formation in the presence of Jesus. This has been the experience of the Church throughout its history, and I am convinced that it should also be our experience now.

47. I ask every parish in the diocese to facilitate some form of small group prayer and faith sharing for the members of the parish and anyone who is interested. The Diocese of Fargo will make available a variety of models for small groups, and will work with parishes to support groups with materials and ongoing formation. Pastors will have an animating role, offering their own presence and support whenever possible, but the faithful should have the freedom to adopt their own manner and pace. The principal value of such gatherings will not be measured by material covered but by the gathering itself and the spiritual fruits for the members. Small groups are not an entity unto themselves, but are part of the larger parish family, and should always remain aware of their relationship to the larger family of the Church.

*Formation of Youth: Parish Religious Education, Catholic Schools, and Homeschooling*

48. The education and formation of children and young people is a solemn responsibility of the Church. Parents, as the first educators of their own children, have a God-given duty by their vocation to educate and pass on the faith to their children (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3, 6). This obligation cannot be emphasized enough, and has ramifications for the eternal destiny of children, who depend on their parents to receive the same gift of faith that we have received. The Church, too, as the family of faith established by Jesus Christ, shares in this responsibility to pass on the faith and form young people in their calling as children of God and followers of his Son. Once again, the Church does not replace or supplant the role of parents, but has its own obligation to assist parents and share the faith in a systematic way with young people. For this reason, the Church has historically regarded education and faith formation as one of its highest priorities, and it has gone to great lengths to assure that Christian formation happens in the lives of all young people (*ibid.*).

49. Even before its founding in 1889, Catholic schools were established in the Diocese of Fargo to provide a quality education for youth and clear formation in Catholic life and doctrine. That apostolate has continued to this day and remains a high priority for our diocesan family. The Catholic schools in our diocese are a treasure to be cherished and supported, and they are one of the principal means by which the Church carries out its mission of Christian formation. Our Catholic schools are an integral apostolate of our parishes and our diocese, and they deserve and require support, both moral and material, for the advancement of their mission. There is no question that Catholic schools require sacrifices on the part of all the faithful, but they offer an incomparable service to our children, our families, our parishes, and the entire diocesan Church. After a period of contraction, we have been blessed to see the network of Catholic schools in our diocese actually grow in recent years, thanks to the commitment of pastors, educators, and families. This commitment must remain strong and vibrant so that integral Catholic education may thrive and become even more available to every family who desires it.

50. The large majority of our children and young people receive their faith formation through parish programs of religious education. Under the guidance of our pastors and through the efforts of parish catechists, our young people are given a thorough catechetical formation in the setting

of their own parish family. The multitude of parish directors of religious education and catechists are a great blessing to our parishes and our diocese, and they ensure that the faith formation of our young people continues year after year. They deserve and require our heartfelt support as they strive to share our Catholic faith with our children every week. While the pastor has an essential role in the work of parish catechesis, the responsibility is not his alone. All parishioners, especially parents of children, should make every effort to share in the work of catechesis, especially by serving as teachers or teacher assistants.

51. In 2016, I mandated a uniform religious education curriculum throughout the Diocese of Fargo, along with a catechetical series to be used in all our parishes and schools. This ensured that religious education would be consistent across the many parishes of our diocese, and it would also enable pastors and catechists to have reliable and consistent resources for their teaching ministry. After ten years of use, and at the recommendation of the diocesan Synod, I have initiated a process of review of the curriculum and the catechetical materials. This review will allow updating of the curriculum and the possible adoption of new catechetical resources. It is my intention that the curriculum and materials adopted will be used throughout the diocese, so that children, families, catechists, and pastors may all benefit from a thorough and consistent program of religious formation across all ages and in every parish.

52. A growing number of families in our diocese have chosen to homeschool their children, and this often includes faith formation. Parents who have the freedom and the ability to educate their own children are living out in a particular way the Church's understanding of parents as the first teachers of their children. This is a laudable endeavor, and it deserves the support of our diocesan family. Parishes should assist homeschooling families by sharing faith formation materials and offering opportunities to support the education of their children. Homeschooling families often seek curriculum and teaching resources that will assist them in their efforts. Many national organizations produce homeschooling programs and materials that make this work feasible for parents. While some of these materials come from Catholic sources, many others do not, and some are incompatible with our Catholic faith. Homeschooling parents should therefore be especially vigilant to choose only those materials that are in full harmony with Catholic teaching and the Magisterium of the Church. Pastors and diocesan catechetical staff can offer guidance whenever questions arise about the suitability of catechetical materials.

### *Formation of Young Adults*

53. The ongoing formation of young adults must be a priority for our diocesan Church. Personal observation, as well as statistical research, indicates that many young adults, both single and married, have absented themselves from active participation in the life of the Church. This certainly affects our parishes, but more importantly, it affects the lives and spirituality of young adults themselves. It is often said that youth and young adults are the future of the Church, but Pope Leo XIV, in an address to young people, said, "You are not only the future of the Church, you are the present. Your voices, your ideas, your faith matter right now, and the Church needs you" (Video Conference with Young People, Nov. 21, 2025). Young adults, in particular, have launched into the world with new responsibilities and hopes for the life that awaits them. It is necessary for the Church to accompany them on this journey and to recognize the gifts and contributions they have to offer.

54. In early adulthood, the new challenges of schooling, employment, family, relocation, and a new community can be overwhelming. Some young adults experience isolation and loneliness,

and others become deeply immersed in the secular culture that surrounds us. Through all of this, the Church, in our parishes and throughout our diocese, must give special attention to young adults and offer the riches of our faith and friendship in the Christian community. Faith formation, which may have extended into the high school years, often diminishes in early adulthood or before as other activities and responsibilities take center stage. But like all members of the Church, young adults have great need for ongoing formation in our faith, not only in an intellectual sense, but also through engagement with our community of faith. Opportunities for involvement in the parish, for fraternal gatherings, for faith enrichment with Scripture and catechesis, should be offered in a way that takes into account the particular life situation and needs of young adults.

55. Campus ministry is a vital and fruitful ministry to young adults in the Diocese of Fargo. As they navigate through the life of higher education, they wrestle with questions of faith, relationships, future careers, and the ordinary challenges of daily life. Our diocese is blessed with strong campus ministries at our major universities, and these campus parishes are crucial places of outreach and formation to thousands of young adults, both Catholic and non-Catholic. It is during their college years that young adults often make some of the most significant decisions of their lives, especially regarding their vocations. Countless vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and Christian marriage have come forth from our campus parishes, and many faithful leaders within our diocese have been formed in these settings. Our campus ministries, entrusted to the patronage of the newest Doctor of the Church, St. John Henry Newman, serve young adults from all parts of our diocese, and therefore they deserve the support of all the faithful in our diocese as well.

#### *Mass Media and Social Media*

56. Mass media and social media have grown in importance as a means of formation in the Church. The multiplication of media sources and outlets in recent years has changed the way we communicate and receive information, not only in matters of the secular world, but in matters of faith as well. This has important ramifications for our formation as followers of Christ. A vast array of media sources and social media outlets offer news, information, and resources specifically oriented to the Catholic faith and the Church. We can access sources and information that once were unavailable to us, for example, Scripture commentaries and courses, catechetical resources, coverage of national and international events, and opportunities to see and hear from great witnesses of our Catholic faith. We are immeasurably blessed and enriched by these opportunities, and parishes and families should wisely take advantage of them. As the number of those seeking to learn about the Catholic faith and even enter the Church has grown, many report that they were drawn by information they found through electronic media. Clearly, this is a tool that can be used to good effect for building up our Lord's Kingdom.

57. Conversely, we must also be aware of those mass media and social media outlets that invalidly claim to represent the Catholic Church and its teaching. Far too often, these commentators present a narrow agenda that is not in harmony with Catholic teaching and discipline. Sometimes what we read and hear through social and mass media is simply untrue. To echo the words of our Lord, let the consumer beware of "false prophets" (cf. Mt 24:11) who present themselves as authentic sources of information on all things Catholic, but who often distort the truth in its fulness and create discord and division. All of us, both clergy and faithful, should carefully consider the content that we absorb through mass and social media, especially anything that is at variance with the teaching and pastoral governance of the popes and bishops,

who have been given full authority to teach, govern, and sanctify by Christ himself (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 21; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1558).

58. Our own use of mass media and participation in social media should always be governed by Gospel charity and adherence to the truth. Our quest for information or relationship through the various forms of media must always be guided by the truth as it is taught authentically by the Church. Through our use of the media, our witness to the truth in charity can help us to grow in virtue, and it can also be formative for others.

### **III. Mission**

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

59. Finally, where does our encounter and our formation in Christ lead us? It leads us directly into the mission that Jesus has given to each of us as his friends and disciples: to live our faith and to be witnesses of that faith to others. In his January 2, 2026 address to young people gathered at SEEK 2026, the annual conference of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, Pope Leo XIV said: “After meeting Jesus, Andrew could not help but share with his brother what he had found. Indeed, missionary zeal is born from an encounter with Christ. We desire to share with others what we have received, so that they, too, can come to know the fulness of love and truth found only in him. I pray that... all of you will be moved by this same missionary zeal to share with those around you the joy that you have received from a genuine encounter with the Lord.”

60. It is widely observed that our culture no longer supports the faith, and in many ways actively opposes it. Like the early followers of Jesus, we now live in apostolic times, a time when knowledge of God and the Christian faith has diminished. But in this context, every baptized Catholic, and every member of every parish in the Diocese of Fargo is called and sent to be a witness of Jesus Christ and to participate actively in the mission that Jesus entrusted to his Church. To use a phrase used often by Pope Francis, every Christian by virtue of Baptism is called to be a “missionary disciple” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). In other words, we are disciples—followers of Christ—who are sent out by him on mission.

61. This call to mission is urgent. Recent history and demographic data indicate that many of our parishes will no longer exist in a generation unless we rediscover the sense of mission that Jesus gave to all his followers. Our diocesan Synod recognized this urgency and this renewed call to mission. I believe we can all agree that a gradual decline is not what our Lord desires for his Church. And so, it is necessary for all of us to embrace the mission given us by our Lord, that is, to be his witnesses and to share the gift that we have received. Referring again to the exhortation of Pope Francis, the Church must seek out the people of our time. We must be a “Church on her feet,” a Church that “goes forth,” a community of missionary disciples who take initiative, engage, accompany, and bear fruit. This is especially true as our culture becomes more indifferent, and people are more isolated from one another, either by choice or by circumstances. Although fewer people identify with religious faith, this opens up great opportunities to witness to our faith and hope in Christ. As Jesus said, “The harvest is abundant...” (Mt 9:37).

62. This notion of mission and evangelization is not new. In 1975, Pope St. Paul VI issued this important call to action: “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people

constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize..." (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 4, 14). The Church exists to proclaim the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus above all our other proclamations and ministries. The Church has an essential mission to lead all people into a personal and lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship that transforms everything in our lives—our hearts, our minds, our desires, our plans, and our decisions. And every one of us has a part to play in this great mission.

### *The Parish as Center of Mission*

63. Every parish, as a local community of the diocesan Church, shares in the mission given by our Lord to the universal Church: "Go and make disciples..." A parish is called together as a community of faith and charity, but is also placed in the world as a center of evangelization and mission. The parish is a place where the faithful encounter our Lord, and where they are formed through the grace of the Holy Spirit as committed disciples of Jesus. But the parish is then a place of mission whose members become witnesses to others of the gift they have received. We are sent by our Lord to each other with love, but we are also sent by the same Lord to those who are not part of our community, who have not yet learned about Jesus Christ.

64. The parish, as a community of those baptized into the life of the Trinity, is ipso facto a community of "missionary disciples." Every member is commissioned by our Lord to go out and proclaim Christ to others, each according to his or her state in life. We are equipped by the grace of our Baptism to live out our faith in such a way that others will be drawn to our Lord and his Church. The communal character of the parish also gives assurance that we are not alone in this mission. We are surrounded by brothers and sisters, fellow missionaries who also are sent by our Lord as his witnesses. Like the apostles whom our Lord sent out two by two, we are in the company of others who share our faith and who were sent just as we are.

65. The parish also has a mission to those who have grown distant from Christ or are for some reason estranged from his Church. Reliable research and our own personal experience indicate that a great number of people who once were members of the Church have chosen to separate themselves and live apart from the Church. Some have joined other faith communities, and others have continued without any new religious affiliation. In every parish, there are those who have drifted away from active participation in the Church. But as ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor 5:20), we are called to reach out with loving concern, to befriend and to invite those who are no longer among our number to rejoin the parish family and to take part in the life of the Church.

66. In light of this great mission of the Church, every parish should have a core group or team whose principal ministry is evangelization, that is, reaching out to neighbors in Gospel charity and inviting them to faith in Christ and to the family of the Church. This team can be a distinct group in the parish, or it can be an aggregate of other groups, but its focus should always be the mission outreach of the parish, a deliberate practice of witnessing and reaching out to others and sharing the gift of our faith. This mission team should be formed in the work of evangelization, which is not merely a matter of academic study but is more importantly a practice of forming relationships. The diocesan offices will prioritize this work of support for parish training and mission formation.

67. By virtue of his office, the pastor has the principal leadership role in the parish's mission, but this work is not his responsibility alone. Every member of the parish has a responsibility for the

parish's mission and a part to play in carrying out the work that Jesus gave to his Church. Together, the pastor and parish faithful should strive to ensure that every aspect of parish life is grounded in the underlying, essential mission that Jesus gave to his Church.

### *The Eucharist and Mission*

68. Pope St. John Paul II told us: “From the perpetuation of the sacrifice of the Cross and her communion with the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, the Church draws the spiritual power needed to carry out her mission. The Eucharist thus appears as both the source and the summit of all evangelization, since its goal is the communion of mankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22).

69. It should be readily apparent to all that the Eucharist is at the heart of our life and mission as a diocesan family. As the Eucharist gives life to the Church, it also enlivens the Church's mission. Indeed, the Eucharist and the mission of the Church are inseparable. In the Eucharist, we encounter Jesus Christ in an incomparable way. We enter sacramentally into his Paschal Mystery—his passion, death, and resurrection—and we share in the victory he won for us upon the cross. Our communion with Christ in the Eucharist changes us by drawing us into the divine life of God. Through the Eucharist Christ joins us to himself and thus joins us to his own mission. This communion with Christ also sends us out to carry forward the mission Jesus gives to his loved ones: “Go and make disciples.”

70. Our love for Christ, manifested especially in our Eucharistic worship and communion, moves us to love for others. And that love in turn moves us to desire their union with Christ. Jesus said to his apostles, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...” (Jn 20:21). Through the grace of the Eucharist, he continues to send his followers into the world as his witnesses, and as his co-workers in the vineyard. We become “Eucharistic missionaries,” nourished with the Body and Blood of the Lord, and sent out to continue his mission among our family members, neighbors, co-workers, and everyone we meet. This Eucharistic mission is a call to intercessory prayer, a call to charity and service, and a call to speak openly of God's presence in our lives. Our communion with Christ in the Eucharist helps us to put aside fear. It sustains us and enables us to persevere in the mission we have received. As he gives himself to me, I am then able to go to others, filled with his life and touched by his mercy. The call to be a Eucharistic missionary is not only for a zealous few. It is for all who hear this commission at the end of each Mass: “Go in peace” or “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.”

71. In short, our celebration of the Eucharist in Mass and adoration impels us to mission, the mission of Christ for the life of the world. He gives himself to us and then sends us out so that all will be invited to abide in his Kingdom. Pope Francis spoke of this relation between the Eucharist and our mission: “Once we have encountered Christ in adoration, once we have touched and received him in the Eucharistic celebration, it is no longer possible to keep him to ourselves; instead, we become missionaries of his love to others” (Message to Eucharistic Congress of Madagascar, Aug. 23, 2024).

### *Sent to the poor, like Christ (cf. Lk 4:18; Is 61:1)*

72. “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do to me” (Mt 25:40). These words of our Lord underline the call to mercy and charity we have all received. As followers of Christ, we are sent to those in need—the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, the immigrant, the elderly, the lonely, and the spiritually lost. What we do for them we do for Christ. Pope Leo XIV

summons the entire Church to heed our Lord's commandment of love, and specifically to have preferential love for the poor. Drawing from the teaching of Christ, he affirms that "Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor" (*Dilexi te*, 5).

73. Our diocesan Church has a long and admirable history of outreach to the poor, and I can say with confidence that every one of our parishes has actively participated in that mission. Indeed, our mission as a Church must include love and care for the poor and all those in need, whether that need is material, physical, social, or spiritual. Mindful of the generosity and active love of our people and parishes for the needy, I simply exhort our pastors and faithful to ensure that every parish family is dedicated in a specific way to assisting those in need. Perhaps each parish could make an annual commitment of support in time and treasure for a particular group or organization. Certainly we must be attentive to the needs of our own parishes and the wider Church, but we should not become so self-directed that we neglect to reach out to others, especially the neighbor on our own doorstep (cf. the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Lk 16:19-31).

74. By the "law of the gift," which was a favorite theme of Pope St. John Paul II, "man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (*Gaudium et spes*, 24). The more we give of ourselves, the more we receive back and discover our true identity and greatness in the eyes of God. In a similar way, the more we look outward and extend the hand of Christian charity beyond our own walls, the more vibrant in love and faith we may become as a Christian community. Of course, the life of the Church and of the parish cannot be reduced to mere philanthropy. Our works of charity and compassion for the poor must always be rooted in our worship of God and our commitment to formation in the faith. In a particular way, our Eucharistic worship, especially through the Mass, animates us for a mission of charity and compassion, and one must never exclude the other.

### *Vocations*

75. The Second Vatican Council taught that the call to holiness among God's people is universal. Whether as clergy, religious, married, or single, all are called to holiness in their own state of life (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 39). Within this call to holiness, however, there are certain vocations, or callings from our Lord, that are oriented to the mission of the Church and the building of God's Kingdom. Among these is the call to the priesthood. The priests of the Church and of our diocese are called by our Lord to shepherd his people by proclaiming the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments. In a unique way, priests are entrusted with the spiritual well-being of the faithful in the roles of pastor and spiritual father. The Diocese of Fargo has been greatly blessed over the years by the many men who have heard God's call to serve him as his priests. And yet, we face the ever-present need for more priests who will fill the ranks of those who went before them to serve as shepherds in the years to come.

76. Our diocese is greatly blessed in the young men who are currently in seminary formation, preparing for the day when they will approach the altar of the Lord as his priests. But our current number of seminarians will not replace the number of priests who will retire from active ministry in the next ten to twenty years. Hence, we must beg "the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest" (Mt 9:37-38). Priestly vocations come from the Lord, so we should never fail to ask him to raise up laborers, future priests, from among our families and parishes who will one day minister to his flock. In every parish, regular prayers for priestly vocations should be included in the Sunday liturgy. Masses, Eucharistic holy hours, and rosaries should be offered

for the intention of priestly vocations. Catechetical lessons on the priesthood should be regularly included in our religious education programs. Priests should give witness about their own priestly calling, and as spiritual fathers, be ready to personally invite a young man to actively consider this vocation. And finally, parents should encourage their sons to be open to our Lord's call to the priesthood if it should come to them. As our culture becomes more secularized, resistance to this call may become stronger, but God's grace in a receptive heart can overcome every obstacle. It is my hope that a culture of priestly vocations can grow in our diocese, wherein families and parishes will joyfully foster such vocations with prayer and support, so that we will have the priests we need to serve our diocesan church in the coming years. As Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, "We are all responsible for priestly vocations" (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, 41 ff.).

77. The Church is also blessed by the ministry of our permanent deacons. Since the Second Vatican Council called for its revival, the ministry of deacons has grown in our own diocese for the past fifty years. Our parishes have benefited from the generous ministry of deacons, who commit themselves to proclaiming the Gospel and their unique call to service after the example of Christ, who bent down to wash the feet of his own disciples (Jn 13:1-17). Our deacons, supported by their wives and families, have an important and beautiful place in the life of a parish, and they have a unique ability to reach those who might otherwise remain distant from the Church. Pastors and parish members should pray for their deacons and deacon candidates. They should also pray for vocations to the diaconate and encourage possible candidates, so that the rich ministry of service exercised by our deacons may continue and flourish.

78. Throughout the Church's history, men and women have dedicated themselves to God and been consecrated to him through sacred vows. Those in religious life offer a powerful witness to all the faithful of unqualified love for our Lord through prayer and selfless charity. The call to consecrated life is a treasure of the Church, and we give thanks for the presence, prayer, and fruitful apostolic service of consecrated religious in the Diocese of Fargo. Since its earliest days, consecrated men and women have played a critical role in the growth of our diocesan Church, and they remain an essential part of our spiritual family. Religious vocations have declined significantly in recent decades, but our need for consecrated religious is as great as ever. Once again, every parish and every family should offer regular prayers for vocations to consecrated life, and encourage potential candidates to consider this holy calling from our Lord. The religious vocation comes from God, but he often works through us to cultivate such a vocation in another person's heart.

79. The vocation of marriage and family life is a sacred calling from our Lord. Men and women who give themselves to each other in married life are a reflection of the love that Christ has for his Church (cf. Eph 5). So great is the call to marriage and family life, that the Son of God chose to be born and to grow into manhood under the loving care of Mary and Joseph. This vocation has been, from the beginning of human history, a central part of God's plan for the human family and for our salvation. Thus, marriage and family life are essential to the life of the Church in the Diocese of Fargo. Husbands and wives, along with their children, form the domestic Church, where the life of faith is lived in the intimate setting of the family.

80. The vocation of marriage, however, has been undermined in recent decades, and families are struggling under the weight of many pressures, most notably the decline in marriage itself and the decline in the practice of the faith. Spouses are encouraged to renew their love for God so that they may selflessly love one another and help each other attain holiness and eternal life. And from that spousal love, they can welcome and fully love their children, providing the care that

only a parent can give. Spouses and their families have an indispensable place in the life of the Church, both in the parish and in the diocese. Pastors and the parish faithful must support couples as they prepare for marriage, opening up for them the fulness of our belief in the sacredness and fruitfulness of marriage. Parishes should do everything possible to support spouses, especially in the early years of their married lives and as young parents. The Diocese of Fargo will continue and strive to enhance its spiritual and programmatic support for married life and families. The fostering of marriage and family life must remain a key priority in the life of our diocese going forward.

### *Parish Planning*

81. It is well known that over the last several decades populations have shifted within our diocese. And along with this change in population has come a change in parish membership as well. This is especially true in our rural areas and communities. Some communities and parishes have declined in population to the point that a parish is no longer viable and must be merged with another neighboring parish. Although disappointing and even painful, this is not a new reality. From the time of its founding in 1889, the Diocese of Fargo has seen the establishment of parishes that thrived for a period of time and then declined for various reasons. Many people are surprised to learn that, throughout our diocesan history, well over one hundred parishes have been merged or closed because of demographic changes or simple changes in transportation. With better transportation and ease of mobility, it is no longer necessary or even feasible to have a parish church every six or seven miles, as was once the case in certain parts of our diocese.

82. As a diocesan Church, we must continue to evaluate the viability of our parishes in light of local populations, availability of priests, and material resources. However, the beautiful mosaic of small rural parishes that covers our diocese is a treasure to be preserved as far as possible. Having been the pastor of several small parishes myself, I know the importance and fruitfulness of small parish communities and the contribution they make to the wider church. Our Lord began his Church with a handful of believers who then shared the gift of faith with others. These then multiplied, mostly as small groups of the faithful in the early years, and soon the Church, with its multitude of local faith communities, covered the earth. Even when local populations decline, we should never assume that the decline or closure of the local parish is inevitable. In every small community, there are many who do not know Jesus Christ and have no relationship with a church. They await an invitation to join with us in worship, charity, and community. Perhaps without knowing it, they await the grace of God that can be found in his Church. In such circumstances, the call to mission is even more emphatic, and should never be forgotten by clergy or the faithful. Recalling our Lord's words, we know that the harvest is great! If we are willing to witness our faith and go out to others, then even the smallest parish communities can be renewed with the presence of new brothers and sisters in faith.

## Conclusion

83. Dear friends in Christ, the Diocese of Fargo is enormously blessed, and we are living in a time of great opportunity. Our Lord invites us to encounter him and to abide in his presence. He desires to form us as his disciples, just as he formed a group of fishermen to become his apostles. And, he sends us into the world as his witnesses so that all may come to know God's loving presence in their lives. Without question, our diocese faces many challenges, as it always has. But with every challenge there is an abundance of grace from God. From the days of its infancy, the Church has struggled but persevered on our earthly journey. Jesus promised that he would not leave us orphans (Jn 14:18), and he assured us that he will be with us always (cf. Mt 28:20). May the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who was so present to the delegates at the Synod Assembly in 2024, continue to inspire our minds and hearts.

84. It is this promise of Christ that renews us and gives us hope. Pope Leo XIV offered these encouraging words as he began his pontificate: "For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion, and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to him! Welcome his word that enlightens and consoles! Listen to his offer of love and become his one family: in the one Christ, we are one. ... This is the missionary spirit that must animate us..." (Inaugural Mass, May 18, 2025).

85. With a spirit of faith and docility, and echoing the great acclamation of Mary, our Mother, I am confident that our Lord will accomplish great things with us and for us in the days to come (cf. Lk 1:49). Mary, who was the first disciple, is a model of faith and holiness for all. She willingly accepted God's call and invitation: "May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). She directed others to her Son when she said, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). And she remained with the Church to offer her motherly prayer and support (cf. Acts 1:14). Let us ask Mary under her title of the Immaculate Conception, the patroness of the Diocese of Fargo, to intercede for us as we strive to follow her Son.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us pray for one another! May the Lord bless you with his peace!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+John T. Folda  
Bishop of Fargo  
Feast of the Presentation of the Lord  
February 2, 2026