



Holy Mass Commemorating the 125th Anniversary of the Diocese of Sioux Falls

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Presentation College, Aberdeen

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Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

It is a pleasure for me to be here this morning as we continue our year-long celebration of the 125 years of the Diocese of Sioux Falls. We do so to honor those who went before, to recall their life and faith experiences and to learn from them. Having thus honored and learned then we will be better able to face the challenges of our day with the hope and resolve they model for us.

By being here in Aberdeen we recognize that a diocese and the Church are not limited to the See city but are as expansive as the faith of the people. Our diocese is 35,000 square miles dotted with towns small and large, with farms, ranches and businesses, with churches and schools dedicated to the saints and to Christ. Crosses which list the over 300 parishes that have existed over the years are in pilgrimage during the jubilee year. The name of a diocese is based on the city in which the bishop's chair is located; for us it is Sioux Falls. But a diocese is not a name it is a family of faith.

Today we remember with grateful hearts in a special way the consecrated women and men religious who have been and remain an integral part of this diocese. The presence of religious predates the establishment of the diocese. I recall fondly celebrating here the 125th anniversary of the Presentation sisters a few years ago. May I express on behalf of my seven predecessor bishops heartfelt gratitude for the many ways religious and consecrated have helped build and sustain the church on the prairie and continue to do so, especially in education and health care, in parish and diocesan office, and in prayer. We know it has not been without hardship but faith sustains and empowers for it is the Lord's work to which all are called.

You will note in your program that 18 men's and 23 women's religious orders have ministered here over these 125 years. Theirs is a tapestry of charisms that include teaching, nursing, and pastoral presence to and advocacy for the sick, the poor, the native, the immigrant, the elderly, wherever and whenever that is a need to defend the dignity due all persons or when justice must be sought. Religious life is a vocation from God to, as St. Theresa put it, serves as the hands of Christ, always grounded in prayer and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the Church he instituted.

One of the hallmarks of the consecrated is living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and living in community; neither is easy. Living the communal life can be a challenge, as is all family life. It is often the little things that rattle. I recall the story about two sisters. Neither one wanted to drive their car back to the convent in bad weather. One said, "You drive and I will pray." The other responded, "Why, don't you trust my praying?" One of the beautiful aspects of community life is the openness to do what is necessary for the common good, often at sacrifice for one another. We are grateful for that witness.

While we talk about religious orders and ministries in general, the fact is that it is the individual sister, brother or priest who touches, molds and shapes lives. We all have been influenced, challenged and supported by women and men religious, often unknowingly. I did not become a Catholic until the age of 39. So I did not have the life-molding experiences many of you have been blessed to have in your early years.

Ordained at the age of 44, my first assignment as a priest was to the parish named Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in the idyllic community of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. I spent five years there. And it was there that I encountered Sister Mary Anne Raymond Gasser, everyone called her Annie. She was a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame who ministered as a pastoral associate after years of teaching. She grew up in a large, rural farm family. She was tough as nails and she adopted me; today we would say she helped form me, but in truth she decided that I needed personal attention. And she was right. The fact that I was a lawyer and worked for a governor meant little to her. For Christmas my first year there she gave me a tool box so I could fix things. She would call me to account when necessary, she would instruct me in my ignorance, she would encourage me in weak moments, and she loved me. She died just this week at the age of 90, having been forced by health to leave that parish only a few months ago after some 40 years. I am a better priest and bishop and person because of her. You have your own memorable religious. Remember them with gratitude.

How appropriate it is that we celebrate this Mass on the memorial of the Presentation of Mary when, as tradition tells us, her parents Joachim and Ann, brought their daughter to the Temple in Jerusalem to affirm her consecration to God. As someone wrote, "Mary put a human face on the unseen divinity" and so do the religious who also have consecrated themselves to God. Closeness to the Blessed Mother seems essential for religious life.

Pope Francis recently wrote, "Let us not tire of learning from Mary, of admiring and contemplating her beauty, of letting ourselves be guided by her; she leads us always to the original source and fullness of authenticity: infinite beauty, that of God revealed to us in Christ, Son of the Father and Son of Mary."

While on pilgrimage to the Holy Land a few years ago in Bethlehem we came upon the Grotto of the Lady Mary, commonly called the Milk Grotto. Only a short distance from the site where Jesus was born, since the earliest centuries it has been a place of pilgrimage because it is said that it is the place where the Holy Family took refuge before fleeing to Egypt. Tradition also has it that while Mary was nursing the baby Jesus there, a drop of milk fell to the stone ground, turning it white which it is today. What a beautiful image of a mother's love, this mother's love, the Mother of God, Mother of the Church and our mother.

It has become a place where mothers, Christian and not, have come to pray and to seek hope through the intercession of the Blessed Mother for the good health and healing of their and all unborn, for their families, and for their own needs. It is said that miracles have resulted from these prayers, some are documented there. Such shrines are signs of hope as they too point us to her Son. We visited many shrines dedicated to the Blessed Mother during our anniversary pilgrimage to Austria, Germany and Switzerland from where some of your ancestors emigrated. My prayer is that through this year of commemoration of the history of our diocese that our local church will better become a beacon of hope for mothers, fathers, youth and aging, for all who are wondering and wandering, searching for meaning that only the child born to Mary in Bethlehem can answer and who is here with us today in the Holy Eucharist.

This mission is summarized in the words of the foundress of the Presentation Sisters Nano Nagle: "If I could be of service in saving souls in my part of the globe, I would gladly do all in my power." For 125 years the light of Christ has shone through the religious and consecrated throughout all of Eastern South Dakota, saving souls in this part of the globe, the Diocese of Sioux Falls.

As our anniversary prayer puts it:

"We thank God, especially for those who have gone before, lay men and women, clergy and consecrated, native and immigrant who with courage and sacrifice built and sustained the Church on the prairie and who bequeathed us an inspiring Legacy of Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."

I give praise to the Lord for them, and for you.