



***Holy Mass Commemorating the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Diocese of Sioux Falls***

**The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain  
Bishop of Sioux Falls**

**Celebrated on the farm of Mr. & Mrs. Kent & Gay Swenson  
near Woonsocket, SD**

**June 27, 2015**

***Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time***

Today we continue our commemoration of the 125 years of the Diocese of Sioux Falls with the recognition of the important role agriculture and rural life have played over those years. Many who immigrated to South Dakota did so with the expectation of owning and working the land in freedom. They brought with them the faith of their youth and passed it on as you do today. Yearning for the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, they built and maintained parishes as you do today. The thread that ties rural life together is faith in God which is reflected in strong families whose members are good stewards of God's creation.

In his recent encyclical on the environment, Pope Francis reminded us that creation accounts in Genesis teach that "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself."<sup>1</sup> He continued: "This implies a relationship between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations."<sup>2</sup> That is a powerful lesson rural life and families teach by personal witness and work especially as farms and ranches are tended and are passed from generation to generation.

"Be not afraid, just have faith."<sup>3</sup> Those are the words of Jesus in our Gospel to the synagogue official who was so concerned about his daughter that he put aside all of society's taboos and publicly sought out Jesus to save his daughter. Someone noted that "be not afraid" is recorded 366 times in Sacred Scripture. Be not afraid, just have faith well describes what it takes to farm and ranch on the prairie.

For some, faith is only about oneself, a self-confidence that we do not need God for we alone can know what is real and what is true. Such self-confidence leads to folly and falling. Archbishop Fulton Sheen told of a woman who came up to him after one of his retreats. She told him that he was wrong that God created the universe. She said, “The earth for example is not a little ball moving around the sun. Our world is just a crust of earth on the back of a huge turtle.” The bishop calmly said, “But what is the turtle standing on?” The woman replied, “I can see that you are a very intelligent man, bishop, but I’ve got the answer. It is standing on the back of a much larger turtle.” “And what is the second turtle standing on?” To which the lady replied: “it’s no use bishop, it turtles all the way down.” Too much faith in ourselves or scientific theories or man-made law can lead to some pretty strange conclusions and some pretty sad consequences as recent court decisions attest.

Man cannot change what God has intended and planted in our hearts, whatever judges or others declare. Abortion is killing a baby despite what courts say, marriage is covenant between a man and a woman open to children whatever judges or others declare.

Faith in God and fidelity to His law is often seen as strange, even wacky, to those whose hearts are closed. That in my mind is one explanation for the efforts to restrict religious liberty and freedom of conscience and to force religion to the back room. There is an arrogant certainty in the secular ideology that cannot fathom a God becoming man out of love and mercy, a God who is present with us every day and who walks with us in our suffering. For some, it is “turtles all the way down.”

The Gospel reading has another definition of faith. Faith is trusting in God even when others do not understand. The woman touched the robe of Jesus as he walked by and was immediately cured of a long-term illness. In desperation she touched the cloak of Jesus and was healed. “Daughter, your faith has made you well,”<sup>3</sup> Jesus said to her. We do not need to wait to go to Christ when things get desperate; He is with us every day.

Over these 125 years rural folks have had their faith tested and affirmed. They have experienced bounty and blessings which they, and you, have shared with others. And they have also experienced destruction and loss through which they, and you, have supported one another.

For instance, how faith must have been tested during the Great Depression in the 1930s. This is how one author described that time.

South Dakota wasn’t hit with just an economic crisis. Adding to the distress was an extended drought period which wreaked havoc with the agricultural industry. Crops withered in the fields and pastures turned almost to barren earth. Farmers mixed molasses with Russian thistle to provide feed for starving cattle. Black blizzards created fence-high drifts of dust; and what vegetation didn’t succumb to the heat and lack of moisture was devoured by hordes of grasshoppers which ate paint off of houses and collected in such numbers on train rails that they caused locomotive drive wheels to spin.

To make matters worse, an epidemic of anthrax - a dreaded livestock disease which also could affect humans - necessitated widespread slaughtering of cattle and horses which then had to be burned and buried.<sup>4</sup>

What a test of faith. Someone told me that farmers are always only three months away from bankruptcy because of uncontrollable events. The author also though describes the prayers and processions reaching out to God for strength and perseverance during that hard time.

Despite the destruction and loss then, look around us today – faith, family and proper care for the land has resulted in great bounty and blessings. How beautiful is the countryside, how powerful is faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The actress Ann Jillian at the age of 35 noticed a growth on her breast. On the way to the doctor's office to have it checked out, she stopped at a Catholic church to pray. She noticed these words on display: "The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. Either he will shield you from suffering or He will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations." That statement of faith and encouragement changed her life as she dealt with her illness and its aftermath. When we surrender our whole selves to God, we can be at peace and put aside all our anxious thoughts and fears while dealing with the realities of life.<sup>5</sup>

Both the ailing woman who touched the cloak of Jesus and the father concerned for his daughter had faith in Jesus, a faith they could not have explained to others but came to live. Faith in this sense transcends us and the surface reality of this world. It lifts us beyond our minds and bodies, envelops us in a relationship with God greater than the moment or the circumstances of the day. Faith, the Catechism of the Catholic Church declares is "the surrender of our whole person to God, mind, body, heart and soul."<sup>6</sup>

There is a poem entitled Life's Lessons that I think captures what rural life and those who have lived taught over these 125 years:

I learn, as the years roll onward  
And leave the past behind,  
That much I had counted sorrow  
But proves that God is kind;  
That many a flower I had longed for  
Had hidden a thorn of pain,  
And many a rugged bypath  
Led to fields of ripened grain.

The clouds that cover the sunshine  
They cannot banish the sun;  
And the earth shines out the brighter  
When the weary rain is done.  
We must stand in the deepest shadow  
To see the clearest light;  
And often through wrong's own darkness  
Comes the very strength of light.

The sweetest rest is at even,  
After a wearisome day,  
When the heavy burden of labor  
Has borne from our hearts away;  
And those who have never known sorrow  
Cannot know the infinite peace  
That falls on the troubled spirit  
When it sees at last release.

We must live through the dreary winter  
If we would value the spring;  
And the woods must be cold and silent  
Before the robins sing.  
The flowers must be buried in darkness  
Before they can bud and bloom,  
And the sweetest, warmest sunshine  
Comes after the storm and gloom.<sup>7</sup>

The thread that ties rural life together is faith in God expressed in families who are good stewards of God's creation during both bounty and bust. "Do not be afraid, just have faith." Another growing season is always on the horizon until the ultimate harvest is complete.

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<sup>1</sup> – *Laudato Si'*, p. 48

<sup>2</sup> – *Laudato Si'*, p. 49

<sup>3</sup> – Mark 5:21-43

<sup>4</sup> – *With Faith, Hope and Tenacity*, Robert F. Karolevitz, 1989, p. 109

<sup>5</sup> – "I'm Begging You Don't Let Me Die", *People*, A. Jillian, August 19, 1985

<sup>6</sup> – CCC 176

<sup>7</sup> – Anonymous