Rural parishes are especially important in the life of the Church

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

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Rural Life Celebration
Birth of John the Baptist
Ron and Janine Schmitz farm, Harvey

From the first day that I arrived in North Dakota, I was struck by the beauty of the land and by the warmth and faith of the people. And nowhere is this so apparent as in our rural communities and parishes. So I’m happy to be with you today for this celebration, a celebration of rural life, and I’m very grateful to the Schmitz family and the people of St. Cecilia Church in Harvey for hosting us.

I’m sure many of you know the story of St. Isidore and his wife St. Maria. St. Isidore is the patron saint of farmers, and I know he has a special place in the devotion of those who work the land. These two were known for their generosity, and St. Maria always kept a pot of stew on the fireplace in their humble rural home. Often Isidore would bring hungry people home to feed them. One day Maria told him there was simply no more stew to give, but he told her to look one more time, and five more people were fed. It is said that Isidore went to Mass every day and would sometimes come late to work after attending Mass. His master, Squire DeVergas, decided to keep an eye on him while he worked, and hid himself in a clump of bushes near the field. That day Isidore arrived later than usual, walking slowly behind his plow and team of oxen. The squire was angry at first, but then was astonished, because he saw Isidore was not alone. Two angels, one on each side of Isidore and each with a plow, were helping him with his work. Isidore and Maria were ordinary people, but they lived lives of commitment to family and neighbor, generosity to others, love for the land, and deep faith and prayer. Their lives teach us that holiness is within the reach of everyone and that the life of the ordinary person can be a pathway to God.

Each one of us has a vocation, a calling from God to holiness, a calling to become a saint here on earth and to be with God forever in heaven. And God places us where we are to live out that vocation, to live our lives in communion with him right here and now so we might dwell with him eternally. John the Baptist, whose birth the Church celebrates today, also had a vocation. God called him to be the forerunner of his Son, the final prophet who would announce the coming of the Lord. John was born to lead others to holiness so all would be ready for the coming of the Messiah. He lived simply, and pointed out Jesus to others: “Behold the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world.”

My friends, your lives here in the country, in our small communities, in our rural parishes, are blessed by God in that same way. There is a beauty in rural life that allows us to be in especially close communion with God. First of all, I think we can be aware of God’s presence in a special way in the quiet of the country. Away from the craziness of our culture, we can hear the voice of God a little more clearly, and we can make room for him in our minds and hearts. We learn to place our trust in him and to rely on his bountiful grace. The beauty of the land is a kind of doorway to contemplation. We gaze on creation, and we see the hand of the Creator, our Father who has made all things. There’s a certain timelessness to the land that reminds us of God’s eternity, and that we too are meant for eternity.

But at the same time, we realize that we are just passing through this life, and that someday someone else will take our place. We are stewards of God’s creation. It has been placed in our care, and so we must care for it, cultivate it, respect it, and pass it along to those who follow after us. Anyone who is involved with farming has a particular part in God’s plan of creation, a plan which continues to unfold beneath our hands and through our labor. It’s a privilege and even a sort of miracle to be able to participate in his plan of bringing forth new life, and even to provide food and sustenance for others, your family, your community, and the whole world. Your vocation, your calling is sacred and noble, and is a source of blessing for you, and for your family, and for the entire community.
Our small towns too are places where community is very real, where we learn what it means to be a neighbor, where we look out for each other and become servants to each other, as Jesus taught us. So many people in our culture are isolated and alone; they often feel that no one cares. But a small community reminds us of our Lord’s teaching: everyone is my neighbor, and I am called to love them, to be attentive to them, to reach out to them so that no one will be alone. I lived in several small communities in Nebraska when I was a pastor, so I know that no place is perfect and small towns have their own challenges, but they are also places where Christ can be uniquely present and where he calls each of us to holiness, and to think of the need of others.

Most of you here come from small parishes, and our rural parishes are especially important in the life of the Church. I had the privilege of serving several small parishes, and I often thought, “this is how the early Church began.” Jesus called together a group of people, not a huge crowd or an army, but he started with a small group that he taught and formed and sent out into the world. And they lived the faith and shared it with others, so that their faith in Christ became a leaven that soon filled the whole world. Our rural parishes still have that mission. Each of us is called by our Lord to be a living witness, an apostle of Christ in whatever way we can. He calls us together as a family of faith, where everyone is needed and has a place. Your individual lives, and the life of your parish can be a light, a beacon to others, a sign to others that Christ is still living among us, that he is with us and that he loves us. Make sure that your parish is a welcoming community, where anyone would feel at home in our Father’s house.

I know that rural life is challenging and far from perfect. It has all the struggles of every other life and more besides, but it’s a good life blessed by God, and a source of blessing for countless souls. Let us be thankful for the fruitfulness of the land and the graces of this life. Let us also pray for each other, and ask our Lord to remain with us until the day when we walk together in the fields of heaven.