

Good Shepherds
4th Sunday of Easter (B)
(Jn 10:11-18)

When he was in this world, Jesus gathered a flock of disciples about him and shepherded them. But he also said, *“I have other sheep... they too will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd”* (Jn 10:16). These are his disciples in the Church that will be established after the Resurrection. Jesus continues to shepherd his flock until the end of the world, but now it is not limited to a few hundred disciples gathered from the tribes of Israel.

In his humanity prior to the Resurrection, Jesus was limited in place and time, subject to the conditions of mortality. After the Resurrection, Jesus is no longer thus limited. The Resurrection unleashes a new presence and action of the Lord in the Church, by means of Sacraments. This “presence” is multifold, and it includes his shepherding presence.

By means of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, Jesus the “Good Shepherd” is present in his Church. One of the primary symbols of the bishop (who has the fullness of Sacred Orders), is the shepherd’s staff.¹ The staff of the bishop is the shepherding activity of Christ the Good Shepherd. Priests too, particularly those appointed Pastor of a parish, share with the bishop in the Shepherding office of Christ himself. “Pastor” means “Shepherd.”

We must pray, then, for the shepherds of the Church, that they conform their ministry to Christ the Good Shepherd, and not allow their human faults and weaknesses to impede or compromise the graces of the Sacrament they have received for the good of the Church. In their ministry it is the presence of Christ the Good Shepherd that is important: *he* must increase, they must decrease.

Throughout the Bible (for instance, Psalm 23), and in the Gospel (John 10), the duties of the shepherd are explained. He must nourish the flock of sheep in fertile (verdant) pastures; refresh them with streams of living waters; guide them through arid and dangerous paths of this world toward a heavenly banquet; protect them from harm and attack along the way. Shepherds must “know” the sheep, calling them by name (Jn 10:14).

We must pray for good shepherds in the Church after the model of Christ; we must also pray that the Church might consist of good sheep. In the Bible it is *sheep* that most adequately symbolize the followers of God (and not some other animal like cats or dogs). Sheep have a herd instinct, and sheep are meek. The flock of God is a family united in harmonious communion; docile and obedient to

¹ The others being the Miter (Christ’s Headship), and Ring (Christ the Bridegroom of the Church).

the voice of the shepherd. (It would be impossible to lead a bunch of cats). If each person “did his own thing,” there would be no church. Christ therefore gathers us and leads us in a common direction, through the ministry of his shepherds in the Church.

And when along this journey a sheep may become distracted by some attractiveness of the world, beginning to follow his own desires instead of remaining with the flock, the shepherd must intervene with his staff, calling and pulling the sheep back. When we fall away from the flock, and get distracted away from the Shepherd’s Eucharistic banquet to that of the world, we become easy prey for the wolf who will destroy us spiritually.

The flock is in constant danger of wolves, whose one mission is to devour the sheep. These enemies are external, but they are also wily enough to worm their way into the congregation (cf. 2Tm 3:6), “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Mt 7:15) who undermine and destroy the Church from within. Shepherds are charged with being vigilant against such enemies.

There is one quality in particular that Christ highlights in today’s Gospel: the Good Shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep.” Unlike a hired hand who works only for pay, the good shepherd knows that the job of shepherding cannot be reduced to pay. It is a true responsibility for the well-being of other people in God’s name, and therefore requires personal commitment and readiness to sacrifice. In the Church, pastors are provided for, but that can never be the reason for a vocation to ordination.

When the wolf attacks, the hired hand will preserve his own life and leave the flock exposed. Many a bishop and priest have “thrown under the bus” the Church, a sheep, a lamb, for the sake of their self-preservation.² Jesus contrasts the despicable self-serving mercenary with the Good Shepherd, who places himself between the flock and the wolf. On the Cross, Jesus has placed himself between the devil and the Church his Bride, his beloved flock. He intervenes to protect the sheep, even to the point of laying down his life that we might live.

Jesus says he lays down his life freely, by his own choice and not under constraint. Likewise, the vocation to Holy Orders must be a free sacrifice. During the ordination rite, the candidate for orders prostrates himself before the altar, literally “laying down his life” for God’s service. Every day is to be lived in the spirit of that prostration.

It is not just Holy Orders that creates shepherds in the Church, so does Matrimony. Parents are the first “shepherds” of God’s little flock entrusted to their

² For instance, to avoid lawsuits, or be politically correct.

care and guidance, grandparents are the second. The reality of the Church exists first in the family, before being gathered into the larger community of parish and diocese.

Parents therefore, must model their lives on that of the Good Shepherd. It is his love they manifest, his authority they exercise, his guidance they give. This is one of the important reasons it is not sufficient to be married civilly. For Catholics, something more is needed: like priests, the two disciples who marry must come before the altar and begin their mission together by “laying down their lives.” This prostration is expressed not by lying on floor, but through kneeling.

As the priests have responsibility bring the parish flock to heaven, parents and grandparents have the responsibility to guide their family to heaven. Let us therefore pray for one another, that we might be worthy of the Sacraments entrusted to us, that Christ the Good Shepherd may be present to the sheep of his flock.