

Homily of Fourth Sunday of Easter of Year A 2020

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is celebrated by the Catholic Church as Good Shepherd's Sunday and World Day of Prayer for Vocations. It is a Sunday we reflect on how we listen and follow Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd, and how we can learn from him in our various shepherding responsibilities. It is also a Sunday we pray for more laborers in the Lord's vineyard.

A good shepherd loves his flock and tends to them day and night. He does everything he can for their protection. He never leads them astray or exposes them to danger. There exists intimate relationship between a shepherd and his flock. Jesus describes this intimate relationship in today's Gospel in the following words, "The sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers."

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He instructs, tends, leads, guides, directs, and guards us. He walks ahead of us. He calls us by name. We are to follow him. The Evil One, on the other hand, is the stranger. He makes effort, too, to speak to us in order to lead us astray. We are not to listen to him or recognize his voice or follow him. We are to run away from him.

The Psalm of today, Psalm 23 admonishes us that since Jesus is our Shepherd, we should not 'want' another shepherd. "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. In verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul. He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side, with your rod and your staff that give me courage." Jesus is our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us (John 10:11). If we follow Jesus the Good Shepherd, then "goodness and kindness" will follow us all the days of our life.

Jesus is the model for our civil and religious leaders. Some of our leaders are like the bad shepherds, in the prophesy of Ezekiel, who pasture themselves and not the flock. They consume milk, wear wool, and slaughter fatlings, but the flock you do not pasture. They do not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. They do not bring back the stray or seek the lost but rule them harshly and brutally. For these seasons, the flock scatter and become food for wild beasts (Ezekiel 34:2-6). Shepherds of some countries, churches, communities, families, institutions, establishments, and organizations are, exactly, as bad as the shepherds described by Prophet Ezekiel. They devour the flock or neglect the flock to be devoured. We pray for their change of heart. St. Paul instructs us, "Pray for kings and those in authority" (1 Timothy 2:2).

However, everyone who is in any position of responsibility is a shepherd. We are to look up to Jesus as our model. We can see the following qualities of a good shepherd in Jesus:

1. A good shepherd has a healthy bonding relationship with those he or she is shepherding.
2. A good shepherd is caring over those he or she is shepherding, especially the weak ones.
3. A good shepherd is gentle and understanding to those he or she is shepherding. He or she does not rule them harshly or brutally.
4. A good shepherd is dedicated in his or her responsibility.
5. A good shepherd is selfless in his or her responsibility.
6. A good shepherd seeks out what is best for those he or she is shepherding. He guides and directs them to what is best.
7. A good shepherd is patient in relating with those he or she is shepherding.
8. A good shepherd makes extra effort to bring back the stray.

We can summarize all the qualities by recalling the words of Pope Francis in 2013 when he urged shepherds (priests) to have on them the smell of their sheep.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the homily, today is also World Day of Prayer for Vocations, a day we pray for more laborers in the Lord's vineyard. Jesus says, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Matthew 9:38). According to available statistics, the number of priests worldwide in 1970 was 419,728. In 2017, it was 414,582; a reduction of 5,176 in 47 years. The number of priests ordained in 2012 was 6,577. In 2017, it was 5,815; a reduction of 762 in 5 years. Therefore, there is every reason to take Jesus' instruction seriously. We pray that more men of goodwill may embrace the ministerial priestly vocation. Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP