

Good Shepherd Sunday – 4th Sunday of Easter

In the first reading by St Luke about the early Church, we learn that Christ as the true Shepherd was always esteemed as the Lord and Messiah. The conclusion sums up the whole kerygma in a single Christological formula: "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus Whom you crucified." The titles "Lord" and "Christ" have great significance. "Lord" was a title reserved for God alone.

In the second reading from the first pope, St Peter, we note another reference to Christ as the shepherd, we being the sheep, who have been healed by his death: "By his wounds, you have been healed. For you had gone astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd, the guardian of your souls" (vv. 24-25).

In the Gospel, the Lord, refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. He was not like the hired hands who collected their pay for watching the sheep but abandoned the sheep in their time of need because they didn't really care about the sheep. So, the Pharisees knew exactly what Jesus meant — he was claiming to be God. They also knew he was contrasting himself to them — the hired hands entrusted to care for God's people, but caring only for themselves.

The Jewish people had used the Good Shepherd image for God from the beginning. The usage goes all the way back to Genesis and is noted throughout scripture till the time of Jesus. In Palestine, the word "shepherd" was a synonym for selfless love, sincerity, commitment and sacrificial service.

The prophets pointed out the main duties of a good shepherd: 1) to lead the sheep to the pasture, provides them with food and water; 2) he guarded them, not allowing them to get lost in the desert or become victims to wild animals; 3) he went in search of the lost ones and healed their wounds.

Our spiritual shepherds act in the same manner. 1. they feed us spiritually in the Word and Sacraments; 2. they guard us from error and deceit in our secular world; 3. they seek out the lost sheep and bring them back to the fold. The pastoral scheme willed by God that has existed from Christ unto today is unique and everlasting.

The pope is the universal chief shepherd who appoints regional shepherds called bishops who in turn appoint local shepherds, called parish priests. The whole world is broken up into dioceses or would-be dioceses which the pope oversees with his 4000 bishops and tends with his 400,000 priests the 1.2 billion Catholics throughout the world. This structure or hierarchy of the Church is God's design since the institution of the sacrament of holy Orders on the Apostles by Christ himself.

This pastoral structure of the Church cannot change and will not change. The shape or dimension of God's flock does change, and in recent times, has done so strikingly. There has been a decrease in priestly vocations in the West, the first world, while an increase in all other sectors. If we divide the pastoral scene into Africa, Asia, Oceania, America and Europe, only the latter has lost sheep and shepherds over the last fifty years, while both Africa and Asia have trebled in the same time span.

We need good shepherds, holy ones who will imitate and emulate the example of Christ the Good Shepherd. We need to encourage our local shepherds in their threefold task of governing, teaching and sanctifying. Why? In our society today the role of the clergy is ridiculed and held in contempt. The age of the church or the Christian faith has passed, some may say. Yet was this not the view of Soviet Russia, after the communist revolution, a hundred years ago.

Today Russia has been 'reborn'. In the East there has been a revival of Christianity, that is both vibrant and dynamic. Meanwhile the clergy need our support. Do you pray for your priests? Do you pray for a holy bishop? Do you pray for the pope?

At times, even the pope, is ridiculed by his own. Irrespective who is elected as universal shepherd, as pope which means father, we owe them our respect. The pope's office comes from Christ when he appointed Simon as Peter, bestowing on him the keys of the kingdom. The office is therefore sacred and bears the charism of infallibility. This means that the pope, whoever he may be, cannot teach error in faith and morals and no pope ever has.

Opponents of infallibility often raise the names of three popes among the 266 over the course of two thousand years, they are Popes Liberius (352-366), Vigilius (537-555), and Honorius (625-638).

St. Athanasius was persecuted for being faithful to the Nicene Creed which we recite at Mass. The Arian crisis refused to teach that Christ was divine. Athanasius was condemned by Pope Liberius at the time. Pope Liberius was a weak man (the first Pope after St. Peter never honored as a saint) and he was imprisoned and probably had been tortured to force him to support the Arian heresy, when he condemned Athanasius. The infallibility of the papacy was therefore preserved even under Liberius' weak leadership. But Popes are not infallible when making excommunications, or any disciplinary judgment. They are only infallible in making doctrinal pronouncements when he is speaking *ex cathedra*, that is, in a way intended to be binding on the faithful.

The story of Pope Vigilius is truly scandalous. As a deacon in Rome, Vigilius was desirous of being pope but lacked support. The empress Theodora offered Vigilius—or so it is said—a large sum of money and letters and aid that would secure his appointment to the papacy if he would embrace the monophysite doctrine. It was an error that claimed that Christ had only one will while he has two – the divine and the human. The commander of the Byzantine army secured Rome and pressured the Roman church into deposing Pope Silverius: so he was imprisoned and soon after died. After his death, just 8 months later, the clergy gave their full assent to Vigilius as pope. Once elected Pope Vigilius betrayed the empress. But Justinian the Emperor was less tolerant than his wife Theodora. He sent an imperial official who kidnapped Vigilius during a Church service and sent him to Constantinople. It was a difficult journey because Rome was besieged by the Goths. Vigilius was stuck in Sicily for nearly a year, and then spent the next eight years as a virtual captive in Constantinople. While in prison he agreed to the condemnation of the doctrine, but wrote a letter in defense of the Council of Chalcedon. He was able to do this by condemning the writings but not the writers. This was enough to satisfy Emperor Justinian. Pope Vigilius was released to return to Rome in 555, but he died on the journey home.

The last supposedly *heretical* pope was Honorius. Opponents of infallibility claim that he was condemned by an ecumenical council, Constantinople III, in 680, which declared, 42 years after the Pope's death, that Honorius be "expelled from the Church..." The Third Council of Constantinople was thus in error when it condemned Honorius for heresy. But a Council, of course, has no authority except insofar as its decrees are confirmed by the pope. The reigning Pontiff, Leo II, did not agree to the condemnation of his predecessor for heresy. Although Pope Honorius was imprudent in the loose theological language he was using that implied that Christ had only "one will" there is clear evidence to illustrate otherwise. So all three of the worst popes did not teach error.

Sometimes popes err in politics but never doctrine. In the sixteenth century, for example, the Popes did denounce and attempted to discipline Protestant and other dissidents and heretics in Germany and England, to little effect. Pope St. Pius V excommunicated Queen Elizabeth and called on her people to rise against her, and it only seemed to strengthen her. I'm not saying they shouldn't have taken these actions yet such condemnations are not challenges to truth and authority in the Church.

So let us remain steadfast in our prayerful support of our shepherds and encourage vocations. Pray that God may inspire many more vocations and that young people may open their hearts to be generous in their response to the Good Shepherd.