

Dearly Beloved,

Today we mark the second Sunday after Easter, commonly called Good Shepherd Sunday on account of the Gospel. The symbolism of the shepherd is not as apt for us as it was for Jesus' first disciples, for folks in this part of the country are not involved in the raising of sheep as much as are other regions of the world, but it remains a good image, a shepherd is one who leads and protects and feeds his flock. Christ leads us to the pastures of heaven, he protects us from the hatred of the devil, and he feeds us by His body and blood in the sacrament of the altar.

In the Gospel passage for today, Jesus emphasizes his giving his life for the sheep as the principal mark of his being shepherd. As St. Peter reminds us in the first reading, Christ did this through His Passion and Cross—He gave His life for us as a ransom, to buy us back from the devil and free us to live a life of love and gratitude towards the one who freed us. Any shepherd in the Church who wishes to be like the Good Shepherd will then imitate Him in giving His life for His flock. As Aquinas says, "Because the spiritual safety of the human flock outweighs the bodily life of the shepherd, when danger threatens the safety of the flock the spiritual shepherd ought to suffer the loss of his bodily life for the safety of the flock."

The Catholic priesthood can easily be seen to share in the work of the Good Shepherd for priests sacrifice their bodily life for the spiritual good of their people in numerous ways. First, they respond to the spiritual needs of their people and place them before their own bodily comfort, whether in hearing confessions or in giving spiritual direction or in fasting and praying. Second, they sacrifice their bodily life insofar as they do not marry. Here bodily life does not mean merely the physical aspect of marriage, but above all the emotional and psychological comfort that comes from having a virtuous and supportive wife, a companion for life's joys and trials. For many men, this sacrifice is quite piercing, but it allows a priest to be more available to his people, to better contemplate the things of heaven and to be an image of the longing Christ has for his bride, the Church. Third, the Catholic priest most imitates the Good Shepherd is dying for his flock in times of persecution. Thus we should praise those who speak out in this time of doctrinal confusion, for they keep the wolf from scattering the flock. Even more so should we extol the priests and bishops in persecuted countries such as Iraq, Syria, and India for remaining with their people, suffering and dying with them.

These ways in which shepherds today give their lives for their sheep shows us that Christ's work as Good Shepherd is still very much alive. Because every Catholic priest is only priest because he acts in the person of Christ, the Good Shepherd continues to give His life in acting through His priests to forgive sins, to offer Mass, to guide souls, to suffer and die for them. He also continually gives His life for his sheep in the Eucharist, and this so that the wolf will not scatter the sheep. The wolf is certainly the devil, and he seeks above all to lock us into repentant sin, beginning with ambiguous teaching, and then slowly getting us to convince ourselves that our sin is not really sin, whether it be pride, lack of charity, judging others, impurity or negligence in prayer and the spiritual life. Our Lord does not want us to reach this state, a state we are continually threatened by, and so He gives Himself in the Eucharist that we may remain strong in the spirit, that we may have His Blood pulsing through our veins to give us courage to forgive others, to turn from our sins, and to change our lives.

This truth about the Shepherd flows into the truth we learn about the sheep. In the Gospel, Christ says that His sheep know the Shepherd just as He knows the Father. "I am the good shepherd; and I know mine, and mine know me, as the Father knows me, and I know the Father." This is a very profound statement, one worth pondering at some length. The Son knows the Father as having the same substance as Him, and having His very origin from Him—this kind of knowledge goes far beyond the knowledge that even the most intimate human relationships bring forth. And we, His sheep, as said to be recognized by having this kind of knowledge of the Son, our shepherd. This is not mere knowledge; it is knowledge perfected by love. As St. Gregory says, "He who does not love the truth is still far from knowing the truth."

Here is it helpful to consider the distinction between faith and wisdom. Faith is the first of the theological virtues, by which we believe all that God has revealed about Himself. This virtue does involve some degree of love, for we believe God because we think Him trustworthy, and truthful persons are worthy of love. But we also know that mere faith is not enough; one can believe all the truths of the faith and at the same time be in mortal sin. Even a professor with advanced theological degrees can expound the truth about the Trinity with skill and clarity and yet not be in a state of grace. This is not the kind of knowledge of which Jesus speaks.

Wisdom, in contrast, is a gift of the Holy Spirit closely associated with the virtue of charity. Like faith, it concerns the intellect, and so it is principally about knowledge rather than love. But unlike faith, wisdom cannot exist without charity. In describing the gift of wisdom, Aquinas makes a distinction between two ways of judging things: one is due to the perfect use of reason, the other due to connaturality with the matter, meaning a likeness to it. An example is the difference between knowing the definition of a virtue and possessing the virtue. With purely intellectual knowledge, we can describe it well and distinguish it from other virtues, but it remains outside of us, something out there we talk about rather than something within us we experience. When a virtue is natural to us, we judge the right use of the virtue even in difficult situations, not from thinking it out, but from intuition, because the virtue is within us rather than outside. We all experience this dichotomy: knowing what a virtue is versus actually living it out.

In regards to the way in which we know the Good Shepherd, we must strive for the second type of knowledge, the one that comes from living out a truth rather than just knowing the truth. This is wisdom: to know the truth about God and the world He has created in the way God does because we are bound to Him in love, and lovers see the world in same way, especially those bound not by emotion but by charity and mutual sacrifice. Such wisdom is characteristic of both the Good Shepherd and his sheep. It is a mark of the Good Shepherd because in his divine nature He is one with the Father and thus knows all things as God the Father knows them; in his human nature, he has the beatific vision, and thus when he teaches us about the Kingdom of God, he teaches us about what he sees with the eyes of his mind, as clearly as we see the natural world around us.

In our own lives as Christ's sheep, we must strive to know the mysteries of God not as facts to rehearse but as realities we have experienced. And this kind of experience of God comes through prayer, it comes through frequent reception of the Eucharist, and spending time with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. We do not come to know a person principally by reading about them—that is knowing facts about the person—we come to know him by spending time with him. It is only through prayer and the sacraments that the intellectual knowledge we have of God can become experiential knowledge. And if we also know how to suffer well, that is, with patience and thoughtfulness, we will come to experience the mysteries of Christ even more profoundly and more thoroughly. Thus the wisdom we seek, true knowledge of the Good Shepherd, comes through these three: prayer, the sacraments, and suffering, and in some mystical way these three are one. And we can add that a human shepherd worthy of his calling will also be devoted to these things.

Thus on this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us ask the Lord, in his mercy, to allow us to know Him better, and to grow in the gift of wisdom, that we may be counted among the members of his flock, that we both know Him and be known by Him. There is no sacrifice too great to possess this kind of knowledge, for we will never regret knowing Christ too well—we will only regret not having made the effort to truly know Him. “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”