

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 4:8-12; Ps 118; 1Jn 3:1-2; Jn 10:11-18
April 25, 2021
Fr. David Pignato

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, because we hear in the Gospel how Christ referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd. It's also the day when the Church prays especially for vocations to the priesthood, so that the Church will have enough priests to continue providing the divine assistance of grace through the sacraments.

The Church will always need priests, since the priesthood is an essential part of the Church as designed and instituted by Christ. If God desires that there be priests to serve in His Church, then we must conclude that He is calling men to the priesthood in every age and generation. When we say we need to pray for vocations, what we really mean is that we need to pray that those men being called by God will accept their vocation and agree to give their lives as priests.

And, when we pray for vocations to the priesthood, what we really want are good, faithful and holy priests – men who become priests for the right reason and with the right motive – *not* because it's an easy and comfortable life, with free room and board and free health insurance, but because they want to help others accept the offer of eternal life that God makes to every person. What the Church needs in every age are priests who imitate Christ the Good Shepherd by giving their lives to God and the Church, just as Christ did – *not* for their own benefit or advantage, but for the good of the people they serve, the sheep they shepherd.

Jesus said, *"I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, ... and I will lay down my life for the sheep."*

The model for every priest, of course, is Jesus Christ, the High Priest and the Good Shepherd. It is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who shows priests how to lay down their lives for the people they serve. A Christ-like priest is one who understands that God has asked him to sacrifice his life here on earth – primarily by sacrificing the natural vocation of marriage and family – to work for the spiritual and supernatural benefit of others. It is for the salvation of immortal souls that God calls some men to work for Him as priests – to be stewards and

dispensers of the mercy and divine life that Christ won for us on the Cross. If a priest is a good shepherd, like Christ, this must be the motive of all his efforts in the priesthood – not to work for his own benefit, but so that others will benefit by the sanctification of their lives. Christ the Good Shepherd teaches all priests that they must be completely *selfless* in their service of the sacred priesthood.

So, what does all this mean for those who are *not* called to be priests? Well, first and foremost, it means what you should *want* and *look for* in a priest. You should want a priest who will make himself available, even when it is inconvenient for himself. You should want a priest who doesn't try to protect himself and make his own life easier, by preserving his own comfort or reputation, when the culture turns hostile to the Gospel and the Church. You should want a priest who will not run away when you, the sheep, are being attacked by wolves who try to convince you that it doesn't really matter whether we are faithful to Christ or live as He taught. You should want a priest who remains faithful to his promises and his oath of fidelity, even when he is criticized for it and pressured to surrender to a modern culture that has decided to leave the Gospel behind. You should want a priest who doesn't focus on his own safety when a pandemic strikes, but one who goes out to anoint the dying, because, “[a] good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

We know that most people want a kind, friendly, patient and compassionate priest. But, you should want and pray for more than that, because a good shepherd is more than that. A good shepherd, Christ says, is one who lays down his life for his sheep, one who keeps preaching the truth, even when he faces opposition and rejection for doing so. You should want a priest who doesn't try to take his life back, even when he is surrounded by constant criticism, suspicion and the sad division in the Church between those who want to defend the teachings of Christ and those who want to change them. What the Church needs in every age are priests who keep serving their people, even when the work of the priesthood becomes frustrating, or discouraging, or humiliating, from association with those who betrayed their sacred office and committed heinous crimes. A good shepherd keeps feeding his people with the Eucharist and absolving their sins in confession, even if he's no longer happy or satisfied or fulfilled, because a good shepherd doesn't work for himself, but gives his life for his sheep.

This is the kind of priest you should want, because it's the kind of priest that Christ, the Good Shepherd, wants. And, *please God*, it's the kind of priest that Christ will raise up for His Church, so that the mercy and divine life that Christ won for us on the Cross will continue to flow through the sacraments to sanctify our souls and the whole world. Amen.