

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER OR THE GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY OR VOCATIONS
SUNDAY

DREAM, SERVE, BE FAITHFUL

"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn. 10: 11)

We celebrate today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, traditionally named Good Shepherd Sunday, and also called Vocations Sunday. On this Sunday, every year, we always read different pericope of the Gospel of John Chapter Ten, where Jesus gives an elaborate discourse on Himself as The Good Shepherd. The only portion of the Gospels that does so. This is the reason that the Church has always chosen to read from this chapter every year. In the Gospel of St. John there are two very outstanding images of Jesus: Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1: 29); and Jesus as the "Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn. 10: 11). The significance of these images converges in the selfless self-offering for the good of others so that they may have life in full (Jn. 10: 10). It is in the sacrifice (of the Lamb of God) on the Cross (where the Good Shepherd lays down His life) that the Son of God glorifies the Father and the Father glorifies the Son. These, therefore, are very powerful images that sum up the entire mission of Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. The image of the shepherd also points to our calling, our vocation in the Church and our roles in society. Hence, today the Church invites us to reflect on vocations and to pray for vocations to the priestly life, religious life, and family life. The family life is very crucial because it is the bedrock of the other vocations in the Church; it is the womb that bears the priests and religious in the Church.

The Good Shepherd: There are so much to teach, to learn, to understand and live out from the image of Jesus as The Good Shepherd. That Jesus qualifies Himself as "Good" here is indicative of the fact that there were/are "bad" shepherds. In the Old Testament, we read about the bad shepherds in Israel who cared about themselves and would live off the sheep instead of providing care (Jer. 23: 1-2; Ezek. 34). Jesus is not simply distinguishing Himself from these bad shepherds of Israel, but He is identifying Himself as the fulfilment of the promised shepherd of Israel, "the virtuous Branch for David" (Jer. 23: 5), who will lead his sheep, gather them, bandage the wounded and be true to them (Ezek. 34: 11-16). The analogy of Jesus being The Good Shepherd implies that in Him as Shepherd, there is more than efficiency and faithfulness, there is loveliness. It is His love for His sheep that stands Him out; makes Him risk His life to save His sheep; and ultimately sacrifice His life for the sake of His sheep. In this image, there is loveliness, free will, strength and power. In our various calling and roles in the Church and society, what kind of shepherds are we? How do we carry out our functions? Do we allow love to motivate and guide, or do we serve perfunctorily for sordid money and selfish reasons? The words of the Apostle Peter come as caution here: "Be shepherds of the flock of God that is entrusted to you: watch over it, not simply as a duty but gladly, because God wants it; not for sordid money, but because you are

eager to do it. Never be a dictator over any group that is put in your charge, but be an example that the whole flock can follow” (1 Pet. 5: 3-4).

Knowledge of the Sheep: Jesus goes on to say: “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for my sheep.” Notice here that the knowledge is both ways: “I know my own and my own know me.” Just as the Father and the Son knew each other, so the Good Shepherd invites us to know Him. The knowledge referred to here is beyond mere nomenclature; it is the knowledge that is holistic and integral. The Good Shepherd knows our person and personality. Psalm 139 expresses the totality of God’s deep knowledge of each of us: before creation, our thoughts, our actions, our strengths and weaknesses. The Good Shepherd knows us completely and loves us just as we are. His Death is the ultimate expression of this love. He freely offered Himself for our sake. The Cross was not forced or thrust on Him, rather it was His choice in obedience to the Father. “The Father loves Me because I lay down My life to take it up again. No one takes it from Me; I lay it down of My own free will ...” (Jn. 10: 17).

Our Response is Our Vocation: The word “Vocation” takes its Latin root from the verb “Vocare” which means “To call.” From this etymological perspective, to have a vocation is to respond to a calling. In the religious circle, God calls and we humans respond – it a salvific call to which we give a loving response. From the earliest biblical times, God’s call underlines a unique trademark that He seems to call the unqualified in the human eyes. He called Abram from among his unbelieving people to become an exemplary father of our faith; He called Moses, a stammerer and murderer to be the leader of His people from Egypt; He called Isaiah from among his people of unclean lips and Jeremiah, a young lad, to be His prophets. Jesus followed this same unique tradition when He called the twelve from among people of low trade and profession, with little or no learning, to be His apostles and founding members of the New Kingdom He came to establish on earth. It follows therefore that God does not go for human standards for God’s ways are not our ways (Is. 55: 8). He chooses “what the world considers foolish to shame the wise” (1 Cor. 1: 26-29). When God calls, He gives us the grace to respond so that with a sense of unworthiness, we may act humbly and prudently in His sight. Our vocation is a gift from God and our response is a demonstration of our love for Him and His mission in our lives.

My dear friends, the Holy Pope Francis, invites us in this Year of St. Joseph to reflect on our vocation from the point of view of this humble, quiet, dedicated foster father of Jesus Christ. Pope Francis gives us “three keywords” from the life of St. Joseph on which to base our reflections this year, namely: Dream, Service and Fidelity. He invites us to dream our vocation; to be dedicated in our service and to be faithful to God as we respond and render these services in the Church and society. Whatever we have been called to do, let us be humble, knowing that it is not by merit but by grace that we have been chosen and that we can only accomplish our tasks by depending on God for guidance. To our young people, the Holy Father encourages them to dream and aspire; to be open to God’s call; to offer

themselves in service to God and humanity and to be faithful to God in all things. Whatever be our calling, let it be “sustained with greater love.” Let me end with these words of the Holy Father in his recent Apostolic Letter on the Year of St. Joseph Corde Patris: “Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice. The priesthood and the consecrated life likewise require this kind of maturity. Whatever our vocation, whether marriage, celibacy or virginity, our gift of self will not come to fulfilment if it stops at sacrifice; were that the case, instead of becoming a sign of the beauty and joy of love, the gift of self would risk being an expression of unhappiness, sadness and frustration” (CP. 7). May the grace of God be sufficient for us all.