

Traditionally, the Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” since a portion of Jesus’ discourse on the good shepherd from the tenth chapter of St. John’s gospel is proclaimed. This Sunday is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood.

On Holy Thursday evening as Jesus entered into his Passover journey he simultaneously left to the church two sacraments that would continue would both his life-giving sacrifice on the cross and his pastoral care for us: the Holy Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood in the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Recent weeks have again confronted us with the scandal of priests who have abused both the divine gift of their vocation as well as the care of the people entrusted to them by the church through the physical and sexual abuse of children. While condemning such crimes, these acts should not diminish the esteem we ought to have for the ministerial priesthood as given by Jesus, or our efforts to foster from among us young men to its service. In today’s gospel Jesus highlights three aspects of the good shepherd’s relationship to the flock for that priests are called to embody in their turn as shepherds in the model of Jesus for our reflection.

Jesus tells us, first of all, that “my sheep hear my voice” (Jn 10:27). The voice of Jesus is experienced through his words in the Gospel and through the teaching authority of his church in the persons of the Pope and the bishops. The primary task of a priest is that of preaching and teaching. But in order to do this, the priest himself must, first of all, dedicate himself to “hearing” the voice of Jesus. While such “hearing” certainly comes through reading and study, primarily it must be nourished by a life of prayer. The priest must be, and be experienced, as someone in love with Jesus through a life of prayer. Pope Benedict XVI has noted time spent in prayer by a priest is not time taken away from pastoral care or administration. Rather, it must be the basis of all that he does. The Holy Father writes, “people can tell whether a priest’s words stem from his prayer or were fabricated at his desk.”

Secondly, Jesus speaks of “knowing” his sheep (Jn. 10:28). In biblical times (and still today) shepherds lived with the flock as it traveled from place to place. Shepherds led and protected the flock as they traveled together through “dark valleys and the shadow of death” coming to rest in “green pastures beside still waters” (Ps. 23). A priest is called to live in intimate union with the people he has been given to pastor—to listen to them not only with his ears but, even more, with his heart; to enter into their joys, hopes, fears, disappointments, and sorrows; to offer strength, challenge, comfort and consolation by word, and at times, silent presence when no words can ease the pain or emptiness of a given situation. This is why the crime of abuse is so abhorrent; it violates the trust that people place in their priest.

Finally, Jesus states that as a result of hearing the shepherd’s voice, the flock “follows him” (Jn.10:28). As people experience the faith and care of the priest, they will follow him because they know of his commitment to Jesus and to them; that he will not leave them abandoned. Such self-sacrificing love, proclaimed and made present in the Holy Eucharist, over which the priest presides, brings both priest, and people, “eternal life” (Jn. 10:28).

As we celebrate “Good Shepherd Sunday” and the World Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood, our parish Vocation Committee extends to all of us an invitation to join their efforts in fostering vocations to the priesthood through the “Vocation Chalice” program. Individuals and families can sign up to take home and prominently display a special chalice for a week and each day offer an accompanying prayer for priestly vocations. This symbol and prayer reminds us that priestly vocations come from among us: our families, our parish, and that all of us have a responsibility to foster them. You can learn more about the program in the Social Hall following Mass. As your pastor, thank you for all you do to support me in my vocation. Please pray for me. Know that I pray for you.