

Traditionally this Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”. However, Jesus does not directly refer to himself as the “Good Shepherd.” Rather, it is the image of a “gate” that occupies center stage. The word appears five times in today’s Gospel, with two instances in which Jesus applies the image to himself.

At night shepherds herding flocks would lead their sheep into stone-walls corrals scattered over the grazing grounds. These corrals had an opening only wide enough for a single sheep to enter as they passed by their shepherd. Once all the sheep were in the corral, the shepherd would lay across the opening for the night as guardian of the flock. The shepherd became the gate. Sheep would have to pass through the shepherd to either enter or exit the sheepfold. It is in this sense that Jesus is both shepherd and gate. Saint Peter’s address to the crowds in the first reading to “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” is an invitation to enter into relationship with God through Jesus. Sheep, once given into the care of a shepherd, “bond” with that shepherd. The shepherd, in turn, names each of them entrusted to his care. Once bonded to their shepherd the sheep will only listen to, and obey, the voice of “their” shepherd. Through the Scriptures and the sacraments, especially baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist we experience our being called, named, entering into, entrusted and cared for by Jesus our shepherd.

As the gate a shepherd was also the guardian of the flock from attack, injury or death by predator; animal or human. If necessary, the shepherd would place his life between the sheep and the predator, risking serious injury or death in repelling any predator’s attack attempting to scatter or destroy the flock. Jesus is the shepherd who not only willingly endured the scratches of brambles and thorns in search of a lost sheep in the criticism and ridicule he received from those who questioned his mission and his association with those persons the more “religious” considered sinners and outcasts, Jesus is also the shepherd

who willingly bore the scourging, the agony and the death of the cross to save his flock from being scattered and destroyed by Satan and sin. Jesus the Shepherd is the “wounded healer”. The risen Christ still has his wounds, and it is by his wounds that we recognize him. There is no Christ—and no Christianity—without those blessed wounds. We enter into communion with Jesus and understand his love for us through those wounds, as the author of the first letter of Peter reminds us today.

As we meditate today on Jesus the Shepherd/Gate, this Sunday is also designated as the “World Day of Prayer for Vocations” particularly to the ordained priesthood. Bishops and priests are called to model the same bond of intimacy, healing and reconciling love for people entrusted to their care as Jesus did. To his vocation a priest brings his talents, but also his weaknesses; his faith, as well as his struggles, temptations, and yes, his wounds. Pope Francis has stated that in their vocation in the church bishops and priests are to carry in their persons the “smell” of their flock much as a physical shepherd carries the scent of the sheep with which he associates daily. The Scripture verse I chose for the commemorative card for my ordination to the priesthood is one I return to often in reflection because, for me, it summarizes how I am continually being called to live the model of Jesus, Shepherd/Gate: “I want to share my faith with you and have you share your faith with me, each of us becoming a blessing for one another” (Rm. 1:11,12). Please pray for and encourage vocations to the priesthood. Pray, too, for the priests who minister in the church today. Please pray for me in my strength, but especially in my woundedness.

Once again, we, priest and people, all members of God’s flock, enter through Jesus our Gate as he, our Shepherd, “spreads his table before us” (Ps. 23).