

Featured prominently on our parish’s Paschal Candle is a shepherd’s staff which intersects the cross and below which are depicted a couple of sheep. The staff, more than any other item of a shepherd’s personal equipment, identifies the shepherd as a shepherd. No one in any other profession carries a shepherd’s staff. It is uniquely an instrument used for the care and management of sheep—and only sheep. It is designed, shaped and adapted especially to the needs of sheep. And it is used only for their benefit.

The shepherd’s staff eventually passed into the liturgical life of the Church. Known as the crozier, it is carried by a bishop, an abbot or abbess (in a monastic community) who have been ordained (in the case of the bishop) or elected (in the case of the abbot or abbess) to exercise shepherd leadership in the person and model of Christ. Priests receive from the bishop who ordains them a share in his shepherding ministry of teaching, sacramental ministry and pastoral care of people in a parish. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the Risen Jesus continues to be present and active in the church and wider world.

The staff, the symbol of the leadership and authority of the shepherd, is not a club for the shepherd to beat the sheep into submission to his authority. It is, rather, a symbol of the concern and the compassion that a shepherd has for his charges. It is a symbol of the vocation of the shepherd who willingly places himself at the service and welfare of his flock even to the point of risking physical injury or death for those given to his care. For the sheep it is a readily perceived symbol of the presence of their shepherd among them.

There are three areas of sheep management in which the staff plays a significant role.

The first of these is drawing the sheep together, forming the flock, in an intimate relationship with each other and the shepherd. In the sacrament of Baptism new members are brought into an intimate personal relationship, with Jesus “who calls each of us by name” and are joined to other members of the community, his flock. In the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, through the ministry of the priest, Jesus “spreads the table before” his flock, nourishing and strengthening them with the gift of himself under the appearances of bread and wine in fellowship as the corporate body of Christ. As we celebrate today and next weekend some the youngest members of Jesus’ flock partake for the first time at Jesus’ table through Holy Communion, hopefully we all reflect on the loving care of Jesus for us each time we gather for Mass and receive Holy Communion.

Secondly, the crook or hook of the staff is used for rescuing sheep who have wandered off and gotten snagged in brambles or fallen into a crevice and cannot of their own power return to the flock. In order that none of the flock be lost, in the sacrament of Penance Jesus the Shepherd extends his staff of divine mercy and forgiveness to any member who has fallen or become trapped by the entanglements of sin in its many guises. So great is the shepherd's concern that none of his flock be lost, that he will leave the ninety-nine in safety and search for the one who is lost; a truth which Pope Francis continues to proclaim in his call for bishops and priests, as well as the whole church in the image of a field hospital, to journey to the "peripheries" in order to bind up the wounded and lost.

Finally, the staff is used to guide the sheep. Applying pressure as he lays the staff on the side of the sheep the shepherd guides the sheep into the way he wants it to go with the assurance that the sheep does not travel alone; the shepherd goes beside it. At times the shepherd may have to use the end of his staff to "drive out" the reluctant sheep in the pen, prodding them to set out for other pastures, but always, with the shepherd "leading them out".

Please remember in your prayers Pope Francis, Shepherd of the Universal Church, Archbishop Jackels, Shepherd of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, and me as your pastor. Please pray for and risk personally inviting young men from our parish in whom you see shepherding potential to seriously ponder Jesus' invitation to shepherd his people as priests in the church. The need in our archdiocese is great.

The Lord is our Shepherd, his staff guides and gives us courage.

Fr. Jim Secora