

Fr. John Homily, Good Shepherd Sunday, May 8, 2022

JMJ CHS

Every year at this time right after Easter, we celebrate *Good Shepherd Sunday*. It's not really an official feast day of the Church; just a special day based on the readings of the three yearly cycles. Each one is about Jesus as "The Good Shepherd" which is one of the many titles and most popular images of Jesus. Why so popular? Well, because it's a beautiful image. Did you know that one of the first depictions of Jesus was found in the catacombs and it showed him as a young boy, without a beard, with a sheep over His shoulders? Undoubtedly that was a lost sheep who had strayed, Jesus had sought out and once found, carried it back to the safety of the sheepfold. And the lost sheep represents us. As the scripture says, "*All we like sheep have gone astray, everyone to his own way.*"

When I entered the seminary we were given a textbook that was authored by Pope John Paul II. It came out about 1994 and was called *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which in Latin means, *I Will Give You Shepherds*. It's a line from the prophet Jeremiah which is a promise given to the people, through the prophet, that God would provide shepherds for his people. And it goes on to add "*shepherds after my own heart.*"

Well, that sounds very positive, encouraging and reassuring, but as we know, there have been some not-so-good shepherds along the way. And so it's interesting to note that when Jesus identified Himself as "The Good Shepherd", the implication was that there must be also be some who will not be good shepherds; who are men not after His own heart, but who are more concerned with their own hearts, and their own well-being. I guess this has always been and always will be. But at least for the moment, let's focus on the good ones.

With Jesus as the model of what it means to be a good shepherd, we priests, and the seminarians who are currently in formation, have a high standard to follow. The standard is Jesus; and He set the bar pretty high. As we look at the life of the Master, we can see that He was kind, gentle, patient, approachable, slow to anger, quick to forgive, generous with his time, nonjudgmental, and not returning insult for insult. I've settled on a word which I think encapsulates all of Jesus' finest qualities – He was "*gracious*". And so you could say then that we priests are called upon to be, in imitation of Jesus, gracious to all we meet along the way. And gentle with all. Gracious and gentle to all the sheep.

But, as you must know, this doesn't come naturally. Our time in the Seminary is called formation. We are formed into shepherds. Speaking for myself and my personal experience, we older seminarians met together in small groups for four years to discuss *Pastores Dabo Vobis* so as to teach us, or try to teach us, what it means to be a good shepherd. (Key word, try.)

But we all know that it's where "the rubber meets the road" that is most important. That is, in parish life; in our relationship with you, the flock. And I would be the first to admit that my true formation as a shepherd really began in my first assignment which was over at St. Joe's in Howell, continuing up at St. Agnes in Flint, and which continues to this very day right here at Holy Spirit.

There are many opportunities to practice graciousness but in some cases, well, I have fallen flat on my face. Sticking my foot in my mouth. Saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, to the wrong person and in the wrong way. "*It's not what you said Father, it's how you said it.*" So we

have to practice. Graciousness is an act of the will. And I am always willing to try again, hopefully to get it right next time. And hopefully, you'll forgive me when I get it wrong.

Now you know that being a shepherd is not limited to Priests or Deacons or those in religious orders. We are all called to be "shepherds" of one sort or another. Certainly moms and dads are shepherds to their children, and using the adage that *it takes a village to raise a child*, we are all called upon to be good examples to our young ones. But there are certainly many others out there who could certainly use a shepherd. People that we can practice our graciousness on. We have many wounded souls in our world right now. Many are angry, confused, and bitter. And there's a lot of despair in the world right now. In case you haven't heard the statistics are way up for suicide. What can we do for our world? How can we be good shepherds to our neighbors?

Well, there are no shortage of examples around here. Those who work in the St. Vincent de Paul Society are certainly shepherds to the poor and the needy of our neighborhoods. Even those of us who contribute to their work are participating in the work of shepherding.

But there are other ways as well. Take for instance the Apologetics Class that is currently being offered. This and other educational opportunities like our FORMED App that help prepare us to explain and defend the faith to anybody who might ask. Ongoing education in the faith, praying for vocations, praying for the lost sheep of Israel, which these days means the lost sheep of the Catholic Christian church as well. Including our own sons and daughters. But remember, if you are gracious, people are attracted to that, and they wonder what it is about you that makes you different from the rest of the world.

You may have heard the warning about churches being prepared this weekend, on Mother's Day of all days, for some noisy and irreverent protests, during Mass, in response to the leak about the Supreme Court overturning Roe versus Wade. If that happened here in our Parish, how would we respond? Well, we would certainly call the police. But, after that, would we return insult for insult? Or would we find ways to be gracious, as hard as that might be in a stressful situation?

There are other ways to speak about the shepherding that we find in scripture. Jesus also spoke of the *sheep pen* or *sheepfold*. And He referred to Himself as the *sheep gate*. In other words, He is the entranceway into the safety of the sheepfold... that place of refuge where the sheep will be safe and secure. And there's that word "refuge" again. We talked about that recently and about the potential for making our parish a pen, or a sheepfold, a refuge for the neighbors.

When Jesus first spoke all these words he was talking about the flock called Israel; the lost sheep of Israel. But with the new covenant era that means everybody. He continues to draw people towards Himself, and He needs more helpers— more shepherds.

Today is *World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, and I maintain that vocations to the priesthood is one thing but there's another vocation out there and that is the vocation of you, the flock. Once you are safe and secure it will be your task to go out and seek our own lost sheep and invite them, welcome them, into the sheepfold which is called Holy Spirit Parish. By the end of this month of May I will be prepared to formally declare Holy Spirit Parish an official refuge, dedicated to and under the protection of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

OK, to conclude, I know that a lot of people pray for priests. Some of you come up and say "Fr. John, I pray to you, by name, every day." Well on behalf of myself and all of my brother priests, I want to say a heartfelt "Thank you!" We need all the prayers we can get.

But I would like to leave you with a special prayer that I pray along with Fr. Richard every Thursday night, which is an hour of reparation for our brother priests. It should help clarify those things that priests need prayer for.

Slightly edited, it goes like this:

Let us pray for the holy father, our bishops, diocesan priests, and those in religious orders.
Lord fill them with your spirit and perfect them in their calling.

For priests who are ill heal them Lord
for priests who are in danger deliver them Lord
for priests who are weak, strengthen them Lord
for priests who are poor relieve them lord
for priests who have lost their zeal..... renew them lord
for priests who are sad..... console them Lord
for priests who are worried give them peace Lord
for priests who are old..... sustain them lord
for priests who are alone and lonely.... accompany them Lord.
for missionary priests.....protect them Lord.
for priests who are preachers enlighten them Lord
for priests who direct souls instruct them Lord
for priests who have died bring them to glory Lord.

For all your shepherds, give them your wisdom, and knowledge, your understanding and counsel.

Give them reverence and awe of you.

Give them patience and love, graciousness, obedience and kindness, and a burning zeal for souls.

For all Shepherds, give them the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Give them an intense love for the Eucharist, loyalty to the holy father and their bishops.

Give them respect for life and human dignity,

Give them integrity and justice, humility and generosity,

Give them strength in their labors, peace in their suffering, and a great love for the Trinity.

Give them great love for Mary.

May they be the salt of the earth and a beacon shining on the hill.

May their hands bless and heal.

Help them practice self sacrifice.

Let them be holy in body, mind and spirit.

Let them be men of prayer.

And finally, with the blessed mother's help, give them the grace to resist the seductions of the world, the flesh and the devil. So that we all may be ever faithful to our calling to be Good Shepherds.

Amen.