

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER - B - 2006
“It’s the sheep!”

It is all so familiar. We’ve heard it a thousand times. Jesus is the good shepherd. He is good because he lays down his life for his sheep. He is good because he knows his sheep and his sheep know him. He is good because he leads them and they follow him. We know all this. So why does the church always put this image of the good shepherd before us each year on this 4th Sunday of Easter? Is there something so critical that if we forget it, we may be in trouble?

Well, it certainly speaks to the qualities that are critical for those who would be leaders in the church. Scholars tell us that in the Johannine community, that is the church community that St. John belonged to, there was apparently poor leadership. Who knows, maybe they were still arguing about who was the greatest among them, thinking that leadership in the church was about power, influence and prestige. As these passages about the good shepherd make clear, a good leader in the church has a close, if not intimate relationship with his people. He does not stand above them or apart from them. He stands with them as a part of them. He does not have to order his people around, but leads them by his own personal response to the gospel of Jesus. They follow the Word enfleshed in their leader, and can trust his voice when he speaks. So this passage is a good reminder to those in positions of authority, especially bishops and priests, who are leaders in the Christian community. And it is necessary for you to know what a good shepherd looks like as well.

But this is not the part of this good shepherd story that catches my attention today, although I need as much reminding as anyone on what being a good shepherd, pastor, looks like. You see, what I think this passage is

really about is not the shepherd at all. It's about the sheep. It's about the flock. The flock is so important that a shepherd must be good. If the shepherd is bad, the flock will be in danger. If the shepherd acts like a hired hand and danger comes, the flock will scatter. You see, a hired hand exists for himself. A shepherd exists about his sheep. And the sheep are what matter. The shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep because without them, he has no future. As an image of the church, the pastor exists for the life of his people because without them, the church will die. And if the church dies, so will God's plan for Jesus to continue to touch the world by his Spirit through the Church.

Jesus promised to live on in the world through his followers. *"I will be with you always,"* he said. He lives on in the church through his Spirit. And we celebrate that gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples come Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. On Monday evening, the bishop will be here to confirm our young people by drawing on the Holy Spirit residing in the Church. He speaks on behalf of the whole church when he calls down the Holy Spirit. And those confirmed become critical to the continuance of Jesus' influence in our world through the church.

St. John uses the metaphor of the vine and the branches to help us understand. We draw our life from Jesus because we are connected to him as branches are to a vine, sharing a common life. And if we get cut off from the vine, we will die. St. Paul used the metaphor of the human body. We are the body of Christ, with one part depending on the other part for survival and growth. A hand cut off from the body cannot function. It too will die. In other words, we need one another to continue the work of Jesus.

So the church is not just a nice idea, a clever way to organize religion. The church is integral to God's plan if we are to live in the Spirit of Jesus

today. It is where we find authentic guidance to understand God's sacred Word, and where we encounter the risen Jesus in life and through the sacraments. If I wanted to neutralize the influence of Jesus in the world, I would work to discredit the church. People know that to criticize Jesus is hopeless. But if they can weaken the church, they get Jesus, too. To destroy the church would be to destroy also the influence of Jesus in the world. It would stop it in its tracks.

An article I recently read about Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* caught my attention. The book plays into the popular notion that the Catholic Church's foremost concerns are the suppression of dissent and the denial of its own sins. The recent sexual abuse scandal of priests and the pitiful response of some bishops have done little to undermine Dan Brown's lurid fantasies about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, not to mention the church. So why has it sold 40 million copies, and why is the movie so anticipated?

According to Father Mark Massa, S.J., it is because Catholicism challenges the individualism that pervades American life, and we don't like anyone to challenge anything American. While the church clearly speaks to the dignity of the individual person - the good shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one that was lost - the church sees community as more important than the individual. The common good trumps individual gain. Note that the lost sheep is brought back to the flock. Americans are attracted to that private encounter with God, an individual "me and Jesus" approach. After all, to have God mediated through the community means trusting people who may be wrong. And as skeptical Americans today, we would rather distrust rather than respect, let alone reverence institutions. We'd rather just have faith in ourselves and in our own unique understanding of God. And this is

the part we really like. Then we are answerable to no one, and responsible to no one; accountable to no one.

But Father Massa reminds us, this cannot be the final answer. *“In the incarnation, God committed himself to the messy business of human history. His spirit remains with us in the community of believers. Trusting in others can prove a mistake, but trusting only in oneself is a tyranny even more absurd than Dan Brown’s albino monks.”*

I hope our Annual Catholic Appeal counters the notion that we as a church are really only interested in suppressing dissent and denying its sins. We are most interested in continuing the work of Jesus by helping those sheep who make up our flock, and others, who are most at risk, most in need of our help. Folks, the best defense is a good offense. The way I see it, we will be answerable, but not to the bishop or priest. We are answerable to our God who gave us everything, and to those who look to us for help.

The Ask
Not parish support.