

11TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - A
“It’s the sheep!”

Jesus saw the problem. It was obvious to him. And it moved his heart. In fact, what he saw was to have a profound effect on his life to the very end. As he looked at the crowds, he saw that they were like sheep, but without a shepherd. They were scattered, lost, with nothing to hold them together, to unite them. And so, everything that Jesus was to do from then on would be for the sheep. He needed to provide shepherds for them, not just so they would be safe, but so that they could prosper. So while this gospel is about the call of the Twelve, what is really important are not the Twelve, but the sheep, the people they are to serve.

A few years ago I had to give a homily to some priests on retreat. I’d like to share some of it with you. So, for a few minutes, think of yourselves as ordained priests of the church.

As St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians:

“Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. . . (Phil 2: 10-11).”

If we priests get too caught up in the idea that we are somehow above our people, we may not treat them with the dignity they deserve. At the same time, we may expect to be treated with an exaggerated respect ourselves. As priests of Jesus Christ, we don’t look good on pedestals.

Yes, we priests do exercise a sacred power. There is no doubt about it. But where does that power come from? From God? Of course, from God. But where is that God? On a heavenly cloud, who zapped us when we

were ordained? No. The power of God resides in the people of God. Jesus gave his power to the Church, His Body. On their behalf, the Bishop laid his hands on our heads. In their name, we exercise that divine power. This struck me one day when I was anointing a woman who was in the hospital. The rite begins with our quoting St. James about calling the priests to anoint the sick. But in the prayer just before the actual anointing takes place, it no longer mentions the priest at all. Rather, it says,

God of mercy, ease the sufferings and comfort the weakness of your servant N, whom the Church anoints with this holy oil.

So, when we anoint the sick, it is the Church, the people who anoint and forgive through us. And in the absolution prayer during reconciliation, the priest says, “...*Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace...*” In other words, a case can be made that we priests have no real, legitimate power apart from the people of the Church. It seems to me, then, a priest must realize the importance of his people, who hold in the mystery of faith everything he is and has. Next to gratitude to God, I am grateful for my people. Without their faith, I could not be their priest.

The very nature of priesthood calls for a committed, loving relationship of the priest with his people. While it is important what we do for our people, it is equally important who we are with our people. If a priest is described simply as a “man of God,” it isn’t enough. He is more than that. He is also “a man of God’s people.” And when a priest lives a life of committed love with his people, they will never question their worth or value in his eyes. So often, when a priest is distant from his people, they wonder what is wrong with them. *(Remember, I’m speaking to you as priests.)*

Love has to be at the core of our relationship with our people. Otherwise the words, “*Love one another as I have loved you,*” mean

nothing, and a priest can forget about being an *alter Christus* (another Christ). The standard of evaluating the priest/people relationship is not what we do for each other but what we are with each other. What we do flows from that. The day we were ordained, we threw in our lot with the people of the Church.

I let the little ones hug my kneecaps after Mass. I don't shun them out of fear of what people may think or in the name of propriety. I use good sense. I respect all boundaries, and be myself. I hug them back. It's healthy. At least I know I am valued as a priest by someone. And the Tom, the Leonardo underneath it all cannot help but feel good about it.

But what we really want is for our people to know how good they are, even how beautiful they are as part of the Body of Christ. And that Spirit, given us at Ordination does not say, "*I will love you if ...*" or "*I will love you when ...*" Since it is the Spirit of Jesus, it says, "*I will love you anyway.*" When we live in that Spirit, we cannot write anyone off. For it is in that Spirit that we must try to live from day to day as priests. For it is only that Spirit that will transform us into real shepherds. It is that Spirit that will enable us to want to set our people free rather than control them. Living in that Spirit will let us see that the only real power we have to change people's lives comes from our loving them, not from any power we might think we have over them. Oh, we can control behaviors, maybe, but not hearts.

How does Jesus try to change us? By loving us as we are, but too much to leave us there. I can't change my people. But I can love them. I go to a parish to love the people in the Spirit of Jesus. I have to trust the power of love to change hearts, and our peoples' hearts are what it's all about. If

we are not careful, any other power we resort to could do more harm than good.

To those who would eventually be his church, Jesus offered intimacy with himself and his Father. By so doing, he was setting the tone for the Church to be a Communion of Love, not just a fellowship of believers. When our people see how we see them, love them, forgive them, praise them in their strengths and hold them in their weaknesses; then they will begin to see themselves through our eyes, as it were. After all, as an *alter Christus*, shouldn't I see my people with something of the eyes of Christ? Even when we have to challenge or confront them, we do so because we love them and see a greatness in them they may not see themselves. We are to bring out the beauty of our people so they can see it, too.

I recall a friend who had had a fight with his wife. Afterwards he said, "*17 years of marriage and she still doesn't know how much I love her.*" Do our people know we love them? Do they know how much? My guess is they do. They know. To the degree a parish is a Communion of Love, to that degree the Church will be attractive to the world. "*May they be one so the world may believe you sent me.*" "*See how they love one another.*" These are not just nice ideas, but Jesus' dream and hope for all. Each of our parishes is to be a Communion of Love. And it begins with us priests loving our people in the spirit of Jesus. And when they can see how attractive they are to us then, with a little twist of irony, they will begin to see us as attractive as well.

In this Eucharist, may that transforming Spirit that changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ continue the transformation of our hearts.

You are not ordained priests, but you are priests. And you are his people the sheep of his flock. And it has been my privilege and honor to be your pastor for the last 25 years. Thanks.