

Fourth Sunday of Easter Fr Gerry O'Shaughnessy sdb

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For us Salesians the notion of the 'Good Shepherd' is so important as it reflects the real care that members of the Salesian family should have with young people. The Good Shepherd is not like the simple steward who at the slightest sign of danger runs away and leaves the flock abandoned. Likewise, within the Church, all the baptized faithful are called to follow the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Through baptism, we are no longer employees, wage earners seeking remuneration, in the exercise of our mission. To know is another character that defines the Good Shepherd. In carrying out our mission, in exercising our responsibility, do we really know those we are in charge of? Does the teacher know his students? Do the leaders of the local Christian communities really know their parishioners? It is the duty of the Good Shepherd to know their flock.

According to the Salesian charism the cross is lived in unlimited pastoral self-giving. The Good Shepherd reveals Salesian way of looking at Christ: pastoral charity must lie at the heart of the Salesian spirit, **'the attitude that wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving'** (Salesian Constitution 10). Our founder, Don Bosco had a zeal for offering that care, especially to young people, so easily overlooked in our world. He has inspired millions of people across the globe to keep that charism alive today. In his early dream, Don Bosco saw the wild animals turned into lambs not by magic, but by using 'bonta' - patient 'loving kindness' can transform young lives as the Salesian mission proves. Walking with young people will not always be easy; teenagers might not always listen to you, slam doors and offer the silent treatment. Don Bosco shows us a way forward: standing with them through the tantrums, difficulties and 'wobbles'. More than ever during difficult times, when their young lives have been turned upside down by circumstances beyond their control, they need that 'bonta' more than ever.

The notion of the Good Shepherd, of a Shepherd who cares for his flock, or even of God - **'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want'**, conjures up for us images of peace, rest, safety, security, even nostalgia, images that are a far cry from the hustle and bustle, the struggles and uncertainties of a global pandemic in the twenty-first century. We appeal to the Good Shepherd when times are tough, when we are in crisis, when we want to be enfolded in the arms of a loving parent who will keep us safe from all harm. Today's gospel, although it includes images of the Good Shepherd, is full of other imagery and themes, and indeed Jesus' statement **'I am the Good Shepherd'** could divert our attention from the deeper meaning of the text. For one thing there is the follow-up statement, **'The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.'** To be a TRUE pastor, a TRUE teacher or a TRUE parent, we have to make sacrifices. It may seem obvious to us, hearing these words on the other side of the cross and resurrection, and on the other side of two thousand years of reflection on the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. What shepherd would sacrifice his own life for the life of his sheep? Certainly, the response of the hired hand mentioned by Jesus is more logical. What's the value of a few sheep compared to a human life? We can imagine a shepherd trying to protect his flock, but even the most devoted would have to count the cost, to weigh the risks of protecting the sheep at the cost of his own life. Yet that is what is being asked of us: as we have seen glory can only be achieved through pain and suffering. Easter Day can only be achieved through enduring Holy Week - there are no shortcuts.

I think that one reason for the appeal of the image of the Good Shepherd across the centuries is that it is an image of a relationship, a vulnerable lamb embraced in the arms of a loving shepherd. We are invited to share that relationship with Jesus Christ and others, perhaps the young people of our parish in a special way today. Is it so hard for us to imagine that others might experience that same quality of relationship in completely different ways than we do?

Today is VOCATIONS SUNDAY when we should challenge each other: what am I doing to promote Vocations to Religious Life or Priesthood? Can I think that God is actually calling me to become a Religious Brother, a Religious Sister, a priest? The priest standing in front of you today is somebody's son - do you ever encourage your children to reflect on a vocation to priesthood or religious life? How is your parish going to function, especially as the Pope calls us to synod? How is the Church going to function creatively and prophetically in the years ahead? Today is a call for you to be part of that conversation and, if needs be, challenge your own pastor: what is our parish doing to promote Vocations to the priesthood and religious life? It is an amazing and happy life that needs people - people just like you! You can make a difference to our Church that will be as dynamic and unique as you are. We need that energy and support.

If we experience the **'life in abundance'** spoken of so often in the Gospel of John; if we share in that abundant life through our knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ, we want others to share it too. Today we can invite others to explore and participate in what we already share; we want that personal experience of abundant life lived in Christ to be something that can help others. Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ ought to be a natural part of our own life of faith. These times of Resurrection present people like Mary and Peter who share their experiences of the risen Lord with others. The Good Shepherd, rather than allowing us to focus on our personal, exclusive relationship with Jesus Christ, invites us to extend the loving embrace of Jesus Christ to the whole world, to those outside the fold, as well as those who are closest to us. That is our mission, that is our task as followers of Jesus in the world today.