

HOM 4th Sunday Easter 2024 B April 21

Last Monday, I read the Scripture readings for today and began to think about them in anticipation of preparing my homily. And, as always, I also watched and listened to Bishop Robert Barron's homily for today before prayerfully asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten my mind and move my heart and to give me the words that the Lord wants me to communicate to you.

Bishop Barron referenced the words of Pope Francis about a good shepherd, first of all, 1) leading his flock, secondly, 2) being among the flock, and thirdly, 3) following behind the flock. Bishop Barron explained this first using examples from his own life as priest and bishop about what it meant, and then relating it to the life of Christ.

And, sure enough, it made sense. A good shepherd would have to know where to take the flock for its well-being, and so, would have to be **out in front** of them in order to lead them there to the right destination. He would also have to be **among** them – to smell like them – in order to help persuade the reluctant ones, even the public sinners, to follow him. And for those who fell behind, or strayed, or were injured, a good shepherd would also be **behind** them to seek them out and bring them back or bind up their wounds or even carry them on his shoulders. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, certainly exemplified all of this.

But what struck me the most was that there was no reference to Jesus laying down His very life for the flock. Indeed, in our Gospel reading that is the standard or qualification that Jesus uses for His being the Good Shepherd. *"I am the good shepherd",* Jesus says. *"A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." A hireling sees a wolf coming and flees, but a good shepherd takes on the wolf – the devil, his demons, and other agents -- even giving up his life, if needed, to defend the flock from them.*

Years ago, one of our Diocesan Fall Clergy Convocations, had the same theme: *Christ the Good Shepherd*. And I distinctly recall that just about every possible attribute of a good shepherd was talked about except the one that Jesus spoke of as the necessary one: A good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

Now maybe it was presumed that accepting a vocation to priesthood was in itself the laying down of one's life for God's people, and so, the only thing left to talk about were the particulars of what this required of us, duty-wise. But it struck me as odd that the one critical component – the necessary and sufficient part – was not explicitly mentioned and discussed. And that would be laying down our lives with Jesus i.e., joining in Jesus' saving oblation unto the Cross of obedience and love deliberately, freely, formally, and without reservation for the salvation of souls.

This is what Mother Teresa of Calcutta did after she was a fully professed, consecrated religious nun. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, she made a personal vow – approved by her spiritual director – "TO REFUSE GOD NOTHING" -- i.e., to do, speak, or suffer whatever God asked of her or made known to her as His will. And what the Lord asked of her, in addition to caring for the poorest of the poor in His name, was to do this while being deprived of that which she treasured the most, namely, the consolation of feeling God's presence. This was a cross, a spiritual darkness like no other, for her.

What the Lord asked of her was to live the rest of her life feeling the desolation of being separated from God like people who are without faith, hope and love or in mortal sin – but she herself was not actually being separated from Him. It was like Jesus on the Cross, crying out: *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me"*, even though He was not abandoned by the Father and knew it. Mother Teresa felt this way for fifty years until right before her death, but this never kept her from caring for the destitute or her sisters with a loving smile.

We can only suppose that this voluntary Cross of hers is what made her work so exceptionally fruitful. It is what united and conformed her perfectly to Jesus, and enabled her to communicate the grace of the Holy Spirit being poured out to her from Jesus to those she served and to hundreds of other young women and men who as a result joined her Missionary Sisters of Charity or the Brothers of Charity and expanded her work.

St. Faustina had a similar experience after she became a nun. In her *Diary* (nos. 135-138), she recounts that the Lord requested her to make an offering of herself. In part, she states:

During my third probation, the Lord gave me to know that I should offer myself to Him so that He could do with me as He pleased. I was to remain standing before Him as a victim offering.... the whole mystery depended...on my free consent to the sacrifice given with full use of my faculties. In this free and conscious act lies the whole power and value before His majesty. Even if (nothing) for which I offered myself would ever happen to me, before the Lord everything was as though it had already been consummated....When I had consented to the sacrifice...My soul became immersed in God and was inundated with such happiness that I cannot put into writing even the smallest part of it...I was extraordinarily fused with God...(Then) suffering seemed to spring out of the ground.

What St. Faustina wrote about herself prior to her death in 1938 is what Pope Pius XII in 1947 and the Second Vatican Council in 1963 exhorted all faithful Catholics to do at Mass and to renew with every Holy Communion and to live out in between, namely, to offer themselves to and with Jesus to the Father unto the Cross and Resurrection for the life of the world. In other words, all the baptized faithful, are being called to lay down their lives for the salvation of the world WITH JESUS. Priests and laity alike – all disciples of the Good Shepherd – are to follow Him to Calvary and to Heaven, and so, to lead others there – all the willing.

This is because, as St. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said of Jesus Christ in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, *“There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.”*

To offer ourselves unto the Cross and Resurrection with Jesus for the salvation of family and friends and everybody we know is not something new. It is at the heart of the Gospel. It is the fulfillment of the New Commandment of Love that Jesus gave to His Church by way of the Apostles: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

Today, the Church is still waiting for this to be practiced, taught, and promoted by a critical mass of the hierarchy and laity so that it can grow exponentially and bring Christ’s saving work to completion. When I practice, teach, and promote Eucharistic Self-Offering, I feel like a solitary voice crying out in the desert. Yet I continue, knowing that the time will come when the Holy Spirit will unite many to carry this out.

This is the acceptable sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving that Jesus has given us. It is what we are to offer the Father for all He has done for us in Jesus, the cornerstone and Bridegroom of the Church, and so, reach the eternal life for which we were created. As St. John puts it in our second reading: *“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we **shall be** has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”*

In other words, when God is all in all the willing, we shall have become God in nuptial oneness with the only-begotten Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ. It doesn’t get any better than that. Here are the words to pray for this at every Holy Communion, striving to live them out in-between: I AM ALL YOURS O MOST LOVING JESUS, THROUGH MARY YOUR MOTHER WITH THE HELP OF ST. JOSEPH.