

Fourth Sunday of Easter, B – April 22, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,100 words

What do we visualize when we think of the Good Shepherd? I'm sure that, for many, it's an image of the Lord with a lamb on his shoulders. And from there, we might like to see ourselves as that lamb. Indeed, as we look back over our lives and consider how Jesus has rescued us from our sins, brought us along gently (or at times with some stronger nudges), looked for us and called us back when we went astray, and otherwise cared for us, it may not be difficult at all to imagine ourselves as the lamb that he lovingly bears. Considered in this way, to think of the Good Shepherd is to think of our personal relationship with Christ.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, however, we are invited to widen that vision. That single lamb on his shoulders represents a collective, for the Lord bears us all at once, even while he goes after those who stray. More than that, he continually invites those who are not yet part of his fold to join. That one lamb in the mental image thus signifies the unity of all in Christ. Hear again the words of today's gospel: "I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me... and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd."

St. Peter boldly proclaimed this same truth in a slightly different way in our first reading: preaching about Christ, he said, "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved". In other words, it is God's will that all should be united in the resurrected Christ – in his one flock, in his one Church. This unity of the human race is not only his will but is also his project. Our RCIA class each year is a testament to this truth: so many people drawn to the Church from very different backgrounds and in very different ways; all led to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and then given the grace to respond to his call.

But let us contextualize this reflection within the Easter season we celebrate. This season is heading toward its zenith in the Ascension and then in the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As he ascends into heaven our Lord will tell his disciples, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world."¹ The unity of all in his one flock is his project, but he also wills for us to cooperate in it. As St. Paul says in one of his letters, "We are God's coworkers".² Thus he sends the gift of the Holy Spirit on his Church, to help us for this mission.

The question arises for us, then, on this Good Shepherd Sunday: How am I collaborating with the Lord in bringing as many people as possible into his one fold – into his Church? Such a question may intimidate, because it might call to mind more active and external works of evangelization, like dialoguing with others about what we believe and challenging their own beliefs. We need to step back from that and see what is more fundamental. Again, this work of unifying all in Christ and his Church is first and foremost God's. It does not depend primarily upon our learning, our eloquence, our strategies, or our arguments. But it does depend upon our being credible: that is, living out the faith that we profess in a coherent way.

When I look back over my life I see that the individuals and families who most inspired me were not necessarily those who argued about the faith or even talked about it a lot, but those who lived it out in a natural and simple, yet visible way. Some examples from the lives of some convert-saints may also help. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was Episcopalian and ended up converting to Catholicism because of the lived faith and gracious hospitality of the family that hosted her

¹ Matthew 28:19-20.

² 1 Corinthians 3:9.

and her husband in Italy when he was ill. St. Josephine Bakhita was a pagan – a slave and later a servant – who converted because of the dignity with which the Catholic family she served treated her. St. Justin Martyr, originally a pagan, was inspired to convert because of the heroic faith of the martyrs. These are just a few of the many who not only became Catholic but great saints, in large part because other Catholics lived the way they should and so were an inspiration for them.

How, then, are we living out our faith on a daily basis? Do we do the things that Catholics do? Do we pray before our meals, even in public? Do our homes look Catholic? Do we invite others over in sharing and hospitality? Do we do the works of charity, assisting the poor, the infirm, and the elderly? Do we speak up in defense of our Church and our Lord? Do we pray individually and with our families – not just in times of need, but every day? Do we strive always to be in the state of grace, so that the Holy Spirit is present and working in us? The answers to these questions have to do with the fundamentals, the basics, the day-to-day of Catholic life. The Lord stands ready to work powerfully through our simply being who we are. It is his project, and our task is to be credible witnesses.

May the Holy Spirit, whom we have received through the sacrament of Confirmation, enliven and strengthen us, so that we may more consistently and fully live the way we should. May he give us confidence in who we are, removing any and all fears that might hold us back. May he give us zeal – an ardent desire to collaborate in the Good Shepherd’s mission. The unity of Christians and of all people is God’s project, but he wants to bring it to fruition in and through each one of us. And what a joy it will be to learn how Christ worked through our credible witness in this life, when we are all reunited in heaven!