

4th Sunday of Easter - B
Acts 4:8-12;
I John 3:1-2;
John 10:11-18
Little Flower - 4/26/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today at the 10:30 Mass, fourteen second graders and two third graders will receive First Communion. We pray for and congratulate them and their families. I am always moved by our First Communicants' faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. As we pray for them, we should also pray that our own faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist will be strengthened.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus reveals God to us, us to ourselves, and God's plan of salvation. In simple language, today's reading from St. John's First Letter captures that plan: "*See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.*" God wants us to be and to live as his sons and daughters and, therefore, also as brothers and sisters of one another.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday. In today's Gospel, Jesus enunciates the qualities of a Good Shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me..." As the Good Shepherd, Jesus knows each of us personally and intimately. He has a personal relationship with each one of us and wants each of us to have a personal relationship with him.

"A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus not only knows us but also loves us. His love for us was self-sacrificing, teaching us that authentic love is always self-revealing, self-giving, and self-sacrificing. Concerning laying down his life, he added, *"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own,"* teaching us that authentic love must also be free. It can never be forced.

"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." A good shepherd gathers his flock and keeps them together. Jesus wants all of us to be and to live as one family.

Jesus' parable of the shepherd with one hundred sheep who loses one, leaves the others, and searches for the lost one illustrates another quality of a good shepherd. When he finds it, he rejoices with his friends and neighbors. This parable is one of three parables of God's mercy in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. A good shepherd is merciful and compassionate.

Finally, Pope Francis adds another quality to what it means to be a good shepherd. In 2013, he told the priests of Rome that they should go out to the margins and the marginalized and, therefore, live with the smell of the sheep on them.

My brothers and sisters, today is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Today, then, we want to pray for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life. However, because of our baptism and confirmation, all of us are consecrated to Christ and to the mission and ministry of Christ. Shepherding is about leadership. Although most Christians do not see themselves called to be shepherds, we should see ourselves called to be Christian leaders within the communities of which we are part. To be Christian leaders, we have to have a real relationship with other members of our communities, we have to be willing to be self-sacrificing, we have to work to bring people and communities together, we have to be compassionate, and we have to reach out to those who are on the margins.

If Christian leadership appears too daunting to us, we need to remember that we are never alone. Today's reading from Acts reminds us that as followers of Jesus, whatever we do, we do in the power of the name of *"Jesus Christ the Nazorean...whom God raised from the dead."*