

## **April 30 IV Sunday of Easter**

On this Good Shepherd Sunday and the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the Church reminds us of our call to become good shepherds of God's flock and good sheep of His parishes and invites us to pray for vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate, and the consecrated life. Both the Old and New Testaments use the image of a Shepherd and His flock to describe the unique relationship of God with Israel and of the Christ with Christians. The first reading is taken from St. Peter's first sermon, given on the day of Pentecost. He reminds his Jewish listeners that they have crucified their true Shepherd. Hence, they need to receive forgiveness for their sin by receiving Baptism in the name of Jesus and acknowledging the risen Jesus as their Lord and Savior, as Jesus had commanded. The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 23), introduces Yahweh as the Good Shepherd of Israel Who cares for us, His sheep, providing for our needs. In the second reading, Peter encourages the suffering Christians to follow in the footsteps of their Good Shepherd, Jesus, the "suffering servant," realizing the truth that Jesus' suffering and death have enabled them to become more fully the children of God. In today's Gospel, two brief parables show us Jesus, the first, as a selfless, caring "shepherd" who provides for his sheep protection and life itself, and the second, as our unique gateway ("sheep gate"), to eternal salvation. That is, besides guiding his flock to Eternal Life as the Good Shepherd, Jesus is himself the gateway to Eternal Life.

In Palestine, the word "shepherd" was a synonym for selfless love, sincerity, commitment, and sacrificial service. Hence, Jesus selects it as the most fitting term to denote his life and mission. The prophets pointed out the main duties of the Good Shepherd: 1) The Good Shepherd leads the sheep to the pasture, provides them with food and water, and protects them. In Palestine, the shepherd went in front and the sheep followed behind. 2) He guarded them, not allowing them to get lost in the desert or become victims of robbers and wild animals — preventive vigilance. 3) He went in search of the lost ones and healed their wounds — protective vigilance. 4) He was ready to surrender his life for his sheep — redemptive vigilance.

In this parable Jesus compares himself to the Shepherd and to the Gate. The first title represents His ownership because Shepherd is the true owner of the sheep. The second title represents His leadership. Jesus is the Gate, the only Way in or out. He is the One Mediator between God and mankind. All must go through Him, into His Church, in order to arrive in Heaven. By identifying Himself with the sheep-gate, Jesus gives the

assurance that whoever enters the pen through Him will be safe and well cared-for. Jesus is the living Door to His Father's house and Father's family, the Door into the Father's safety, and into the fullness of life. It is through Jesus, the Door, that we come into the sheepfold where we are protected from the wolves of life. There is safety and security in being a Christian. There is a spiritual, emotional, and psychological security and safety when we live within Jesus and his Church, within the protectiveness of Christ, a Christian family, and Christian friends.

1) We need to become good shepherds and good leaders: Everyone who is entrusted with the care of others is a shepherd. Hence, pastors, parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials, and caregivers, among others, are all shepherds. We become good shepherds by loving those entrusted to us, praying for them, spending our time, talents, and blessings for their welfare, and guarding them from physical and spiritual dangers. Parents must be especially careful in fulfilling their duties toward their children, giving them good example and instruction and training them in Christian principles.

2) We need to become good sheep in the fold of Jesus, the Good Shepherd: Our local parish is our sheepfold, and our pastors are our shepherds. Jesus is the High Priest, the Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, the pastors are their helpers, and the parishioners are the sheep. Hence, as the good sheep of the parish, parishioners are expected to a) Hear and follow the voice of our shepherds through their homilies, Bible classes, counseling, and advice. b) Receive the spiritual food given by our pastors through our regular participation in the Holy Mass, our frequenting of the Sacraments, and our participation in the prayer services, renewal programs, and missions they offer. c) Cooperate with our pastors by giving them positive suggestions for the welfare of the parish, encouraging them in their duties, offering them loving, constructive advice when they are found misbehaving or failing in their duties, and always by praying for them d) Actively participate in the activities of various councils, ministries, and parish associations.

3) We need to pray for vocations. We need more shepherds to lead the flock. Let us pray to the Good Shepherd to attract more and more young holy people to the priesthood, the diaconate and the consecrated life.