

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS CHURCH (NEWMAN CENTER)
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA, LINCOLN
APRIL 22, 2018

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I wish you all peace in the Risen Lord! Christ is the Good Shepherd, and we are privileged to be the sheep of his flock. As the Good Shepherd, He willingly and lovingly gave His life for us. He has also given us shepherds, fulfilling the promise made through the prophet Jeremiah: *I will give you shepherds after my own heart*. One such shepherd, of course, is our Holy Father, who has the special task of governing and leading the whole flock of Christ. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I wish to express the paternal affection and spiritual closeness of Pope Francis to all gathered here this morning.

It is an honor to be here in this beautiful, new Newman Center and Saint Thomas Aquinas Church. I thank Bishop Conley for his kind invitation and Father Bob Matya and Father Steven Mills for their hospitality and welcome. In this Diocese, you have been blessed with good shepherds in your bishops and priests. Following Bishop Bruskewitz, whom we are happy to have with us this morning, Bishop Conley was called and sent to Lincoln to shepherd this portion of the People of God. Moreover, God has blessed you abundantly with many priestly vocations, assuring that the flock will be well-fed and nurtured with the Word and Sacraments.

All of this invites us to reflect on the words of our second reading: *See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God*. Yes, the Heavenly Father loves you – his children, the sheep of his flock – and because He loves you, He provides for you. He does not leave you on your own, but accompanies you through the shepherds of His Church. This should fill our hearts with gratitude.

But is it enough to simply give thanks to God for our shepherds and for his paternal love? Or rather, should we not follow the voice of the Good Shepherd and respond to His voice when He calls? In the Gospels, Jesus says that no one can be His disciple unless he is willing to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow. To be a disciple – and the Holy Father wants us to be missionary disciples – we must follow Jesus' words and example.

What example does He give us? He is the Good Shepherd. *The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep*. The goodness of Jesus is seen in His whole-hearted obedience to the Father's will. The goodness of Jesus is seen in his willingness and readiness to lay down His life in sacrifice for us. This is not something forced upon Him. He *freely lays it down* and no one can take it from Him. He gives His life for the sheep. They belong to Him. He is willing to sacrifice Himself for us.

It is easy to think of priests and bishops as shepherds, but parents too exercise a shepherding role, watching over their children, nurturing them and sacrificing for them. Married people also belong to one another, and marriages must be imbued with a true spirit of sacrifice. It is interesting to read the "Instruction before Marriage" that was used in this country prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, because it captures this sense of sacrifice:

“And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son; and the Son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation.”

This beautiful passage reminds us, not only of the sacrificial love of marriage, but also how much God loves us. This is why Christ is not merely a Good Shepherd, but a Beautiful Shepherd. God’s love for us is beautiful. This love of the Good Shepherd is contrasted with the self-referential actions of other leaders, who look after themselves and their interests – those *who work for pay and have no concern for the sheep*.

The example of the Good Shepherd invites us to be outward looking – to not just care for ourselves and our own but to be missionaries. As universal shepherd, the Holy Father calls us to be a Church that goes forth. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says:

Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 20)

This is particularly necessary on a college campus, when so many young people are looking for direction and a sense of purpose. They may only hear the call of Christ, the Good Shepherd, through you. Jesus Himself speaks of the many nations who will come into the fold: “*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 and one shepherd.*” This is a reminder to us that the Church is always missionary. Even in a diocese like Lincoln, blessed with strong parishes, families, and many vocations, there is still a need to gather the sheep into the one flock of Christ, to seek out the lost and wounded sheep and help them to know the Merciful Love of Christ.

It is true that there are many challenges today – the fragmentation of society, rapid secularization, philosophical and political ideologies – to the mission of evangelization, but take courage. You are not alone. Christ the Good Shepherd walks with us. He gives us our bishop and priests to serve as true shepherds. The Holy Father exhorts them to be close to the people and to “have the smell of the sheep” and above all, to walk with them. He says:

“I repeat it often: walking with our people, sometimes in front, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes behind: in front in order to guide the community, in the middle in order to encourage and support; and at the back in order to keep it united and so that no one lags too far behind, to keep them united.” (MEETING WITH CLERGY, CONSECRATED PEOPLE, AND MEMBERS OF DIOCESAN PASTORAL COUNCILS, CATHEDRAL OF SAN RUFFINO, ASSISI, 4 OCTOBER 2013)

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I encourage you all to stay close to your shepherds. Let them know what is on your heart and minds. Speak to them *cor ad cor* - heart to heart. Offer them your gifts and talents in service of the flock in a true spirit of generosity. Pray for your bishop, priests and for a continued generosity among the young to the call to serve as a priest or religious here in Lincoln. Finally, remember your own duty to share in the mission of Christ, the Good Shepherd, seeking to build up the flock in unity, so that there may be *one flock and one shepherd*.