

Good Shepherd Sunday & World Day of Prayer for Vocations - Basilica of the Assumption

Introduction: The Situation in Baltimore

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In the Gospel Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who knows us, loves us, walks with us, and guides us along the way. The Shepherd is with us in good times and bad, in times of harmony and joy and in times of confusion, sadness, and grief. This is one of those times in our wider community here in the City of Baltimore that our need for the Good Shepherd's love is more evident than usual. Let us pray that the love and care which the Lord shows to each of us may be reflected in the statements and decisions of community leaders and in the words and actions of those who demonstrate.

Surely we must pray and work for a community where the rights, dignity, and life of every citizen is respected; where the role of public authorities to keep order in the City is balanced with the humane treatment of any who come into their custody; and where we learn to express even most deeply held views in ways that are peaceful, and constructive. Let us ask the Good Shepherd to help us all play a constructive role in building bridges and relationships that will end the cycle of violence in our City and give everyone the opportunity for a better life.

Good Shepherd Sunday

This Sunday we also turn to the Good Shepherd in prayer for vocations. For over fifty years, the Church has also celebrated this Sunday as the World Day of Prayer

for Vocations. And this is to remind us how earnestly we need to pray for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life especially from our own community, our parish, and our own families. All of us have a role to play in fostering priestly vocations. How important that there always be good holy priests and pastors who will lead us to Christ and share with us his love, a love that not only consoles and strengthens us, but indeed a love that changes us, transforms us, into his disciples and witnesses.

Transformation

Indeed, today's readings are all about the transforming love of the Good Shepherd. In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles St. Peter stands before the leaders of the Jewish people defending his actions of healing a disabled man through the power of Jesus. In this passage, two unlikely people are transformed: the crippled man is a lowly person who is miraculously healed; Peter too has been transformed by the power of Christ love for he stands before the leaders of the people as an uneducated, ordinary man, who is now emboldened to preach the Gospel with courage and eloquence. In these two individuals transformed by Jesus' love, we see how the Lord can transform anyone He chooses ... as the saying goes ... 'God does not always call the equipped but He equips those whom He calls.'

In the Gospel, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep. He lays down His life for them and is raised up again. All of us are called to entrust our lives to the Good Shepherd - to entrust to him our cares and worries, to allow him to lead us back when we stray; and to allow him to teach us how to serve one another, just as He cares for us. By Baptism, all of us are called to holiness and service in the life of the Church - or to use the language of Pope Francis, we're all called to be missionary disciples... followers of Christ, members of the flock, who bear witness to Christ's love in our lives.

And among the Lord's disciples some are called to serve the Church as priests. They are called to be living, sacramental images of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who devote the whole of their lives to the service of God's People. Pope Francis' famously said that priests are supposed to "smell like the sheep," that is, to be with their people, to

closely identify with them in the trials of life, to accompany them every step of the way on their journey of faith. I can tell you from my own life that those called to be shepherds must themselves listen attentively to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Only in this way can we preach the Word, manifest the holiness of the Sacraments, and guide the Church in bearing united witness to Christ's truth and love.

Exodus

What, then, do we know Christ is calling us and what does it require of us to hear his call and to answer it? Pope Francis tells us that anyone who is called to priesthood or consecration must make their own personal exodus... they must be ready to leave their comfort zone, their plans, their wants and needs, and to forth from all those things to follow where Christ the Good Shepherd leads. It is an outward bound journey that leads us deeply into God's love so that we can be placed by him in service to others.

These are the Pope's own words: "The exodus experience [stands as a symbol] of the Christian life, particularly in the case of those who have embraced a vocation of special dedication to the Gospel. This calls for a constantly renewed attitude of conversion and transformation, an incessant moving forward, a passage from death to life, like that celebrated in every liturgy, an experience of Passover." And lest we think we can achieve this on our own, the Holy Father goes on to say: "...vocation is always a work of God. He leads us beyond our initial situation, frees us from every enslavement, breaks down our habits and our indifference, and brings us to the joy of communion with Him and with our brothers and sisters. Responding to God's call, [he says] means allowing Him to help us leave ourselves and our false security behind, and to strike out on the path which leads to Jesus Christ, the origin and destiny of our life and our happiness."

Of course, this is not easy, but after serving the Church as a priest for 38 years, I can say from my own experience, in need of God's mercy as I am, that nothing brings more happiness than getting up every morning, being renewed by the love of the Good Shepherd, and going forth, sometimes into situations and challenges I would never have imagined.

I look around here today in this basilica and I see many young adults. How delighted I am that so many “millennials” are moving into this neighborhood of Mt. Vernon and attending Mass here in increasing numbers. I am certain that the Lord is calling some of you to serve Him as a priest or as a brother or sister in the consecrated life. I ask you today to listen for God’s call & to pray for the courage to say ‘yes’ to Him. Indeed, answering God’s call is exciting, but as with every other decision we make, it involves saying ‘no’ to other possibilities, including perhaps your current job or career track and your plan for your life. Yet, it is in surrendering our plans to the Lord that the real plan becomes evident – the plan which the Lord has in mind for me and for you.

Conclusion

So I ask everyone here this evening please to pray for religious vocations, that many more young men and women will answer God’s call. We should also pray for those who are already in seminaries and religious houses of formation at this time, that they will persevere in accepting God’s call. And please pray for bishops, priests, deacons, and those in consecrated life, that God will strengthen us in our vocations in order to lead us in the ways of truth and love.

As we celebrate this Eucharist tonight, Jesus the Good Shepherd comes to us in the Eucharist. May we open our hearts to him in love and thank him for loving us infinitely and personally. May we listen to his voice and follow this Good Shepherd wherever he leads us!

God bless you and keep you in His love!