

Homily
16OrdB
July 21/22, 2018
St. Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

Today's readings raise the issue of the importance of shepherds. I'd like to use our readings to focus on 2 questions:

- 1) The first question is: What is the primary role of shepherds in the Catholic Church?
- 2) The second question is whether we are truly willing to be sheep, so that we can appreciate and follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and His earthly shepherds?

I suppose Catholics have a wide variety of thoughts about the Catholic Church. Some think the Church is in good shape. Others have strong doubts and serious concerns.

But there's one very positive thing you can say about the Catholic Church that no one can deny.

It's that there has never been any organization on the face of the earth, other than the Catholic Church, that has maintained its existence and steadily grown for over 2,000 years. There's nothing like it. The churches, the schools, the hospitals, the humanitarian outreach. All around the world. Totally unique.

So what has held the Catholic Church together for all those years?

It's the commitment within the Catholic Church to preserve the truths established by Jesus and given to the apostles and their successors. Our shepherds, our popes, bishops, priests and deacons, all take a vow to promote and defend the authentic teachings of Jesus Christ.

For over 2,000 years, despite sometimes scandalous behavior on the part of our shepherds, the doctrines of the Catholic Church have remained intact. These doctrines are the glue that have held the Church together.

The power of the glue can be captured in a single word, and that word is TRUTH. The Truth of all that Jesus said and did. The Truth of the Bible. The Truth of the teachings of the Church that have been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus describes His mission on earth in John 18:37 as follows: "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

In John 8:31-32, He tells His followers: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Jesus explains that the Holy Spirit will continue His work after He ascends into heaven. He says in John 16:13, “[W]hen he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.” He gives the Holy Spirit to the Church so that the truth proclaimed by Jesus will be maintained and enriched by the Catholic Church.

St. Paul, especially in his 2nd Letter to Timothy, emphasizes the importance of being faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ. He says to Timothy:

But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it. 2 Timothy 3:14

And what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well. 2 Timothy 2:2

Elsewhere, St. Paul refers to the Church as “the pillar of truth.”

St. John, in his 3rd Letter, states that “Nothing gives me greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

The role of the shepherds is to keep the sheep together and to make sure none of them lose their way. This is why the most important promise of any shepherd is to not compromise the Truth handed down by Jesus.

This raises the second question, “Are we really willing to be sheep, to faithfully follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and His earthly shepherds?”

Let’s face it, in our modern times many people don’t like the concept of being obedient to a comprehensive set of doctrines. It’s popular to think that being free means we will make up our own minds about what we believe and not just accept the teachings of an organization like the Catholic Church.

So there is a strong tendency for Catholics to pick and choose which beliefs we will follow. We are tempted to want to stray from the faithful sheep in the flock.

St. Paul anticipated attitudes like this when he wrote in Romans 12:

“Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

In God’s plan, true freedom is found by submitting to God’s will as expressed in the teachings of the Catholic Church. As St. Augustine said long ago, “We are free to the extent that we serve God.” And as Jesus has told us, it’s His truth that sets us free.

For quite a few years, I took advantage of my so-called freedom by distancing myself from Jesus and the Catholic Church. Then I came back and gradually accepted more and more of the Church's wisdom. Every time I changed my attitude and behavior and conformed to the Church's teachings, I found that the Church knew better than I did what was good for me. Being obedient to the Church made me freer and happier.

Regardless of the temptations that come from the culture around us, we need truly good shepherds. We need shepherds who will protect us from ways of thinking that cause us to stray from the path Jesus laid out for us. We need shepherds who risk their popularity by guiding us to authentic freedom, knowing that it is the truth and only the truth that sets us free.

And it doesn't do much much good to have good shepherds unless we are willing to be sheep, willing to be led, willing to be protected, by Jesus and His Church.

I want to close with a prayer, a prayer based on two Opening Prayers from recent Sunday Masses:

O God, who created us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be drawn to the darkness of error but always stand in the bright light of truth. Show O God, the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path. Give all who call themselves Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ. May we choose to hear the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, and follow Him.