

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER; Cycle – C; May 11th 2025
Acts 13: 14, 43-52; Revelation 7: 14-17; John 10: 27-30

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

Every year the 4th Sunday of Easter is celebrated as the Good Shepherd Sunday and the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Since, only St. John has the imagery of the Good Shepherd in chapter 10, we hear from the same chapter in three cycles; but in three parts. On this Sunday we have just listened to the last part of the discourse of Jesus. In order to have the full picture of the character of a good shepherd we need to read the entire chapter of 10.

The shepherds had a prominent place in the life of Israel, though they didn't enjoy any social status in the community. But no one could deny their qualities of selfless love, care, and dedication for their sheep. They were ready to risk their very life to save their sheep from predators. That is why, in the Old Testament the image of the Shepherd is often applied to God as well as to the leaders of the people. The book of Exodus represents Yahweh several times as a Shepherd. The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel compare Yahweh's ongoing care of His people to the care a shepherd exercises for his flock. Ezekiel represents God as a loving Shepherd who searches diligently for the lost sheep. Psalm 23 is David's famous picture of God as The Good Shepherd: "*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*"

In the Gospel of John, Jesus introduces himself as the Good Shepherd of his flock and makes three claims in today's Gospel. 1) He knows his sheep and his sheep hear his voice and follow him: 2) He gives them eternal life. 3. He protects them in all situations and no enemy can snatch them from him. In John 10 when Jesus *claims*, "*I am the Good Shepherd,*" *he means that he has got all the qualities of a good shepherd.*

The life style and bond between the Shepherds and the sheep in Palestine are special. In the first place the sheep is very helpless animals and without proper leadership they are at loss. Even among so many noises and voices around the sheep will recognize the voice of the shepherd and they will follow him alone. No stranger can lead the sheep, as they scatter in the presence of strangers. We are compared to the sheep. We too are helpless and we need a great Shepherd one like Jesus. At the same time, we are also Jesus' disciples and we too have specific role to play in the community. So among the sheep we have religious leaders, national leaders, parents and teachers who are specially chosen to be the shepherds of small or large number of people.

When Jesus asked Peter in John chapter 21, ***“Feed my Sheep,”*** he meant that the religious leaders who are shepherds of the sheep are required of possessing all the good qualities of a shepherd. No doubt, in the history of the Church we see good shepherds and bad shepherds; for the very reason that Jesus chose the weak human beings to be his shepherds. Similarly among the national leaders, parents and teachers we see ideal leaders and bad leaders too.

When we hear the word shepherd what comes to our mind are only the religious leaders, starting from the Pope down to the clergy. No doubt, the responsibility of the religious leaders is very important, as they are entrusted with the spiritual formation of the respective communities. Any laxity and scandal from their part can be detrimental to many. **In the words of Dom Jean Baptiste Chautard, "If the priest is a saint, the people will be religious. If the priest is fervent, the people will be pious. If the priest is pious, the people will at least be decent. If the priest is only decent, the people will be godless."** Of course, if any sort of scandal emerges from the religious leaders, it is enlarged and inflated.

Today is also the World Day of prayer for vocation, especially for priesthood and religious life. We are undergoing a period of crisis in the area of vocation. We need more, but holy priests to serve the people. At the same time, it is not necessary that the priest should be with extraordinary qualifications and intelligence. If it had been the requirement from Jesus, Peter would have been the last person to be chosen to be the Pope. What we need are not many priests but holy priests who love their sheep and dedicate themselves to serve them. **David A. Badnar, the educator says, “Ordinary men are given the authority of the priesthood. Worthiness and willingness - not experience, expertise, or education - are the qualifications for priesthood ordination.”** It is the duty of the faithful to promote and pray for vocation. And also they have to pray for their priests and support them whenever needed. Please remember that priests are not angels descended from heaven; rather they are part of your community and the face of the community will reflect in them.