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The Good Shepherd and the Christian Vocation

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Sunday Readings for May 11, 2014 for Cycle A:
Acts 2:14, 36-41; Ps 23; 1 Pt 2:20-25; Jn 10:1-10

THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION

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The shadow of suffering passes over every human life, so the Church wishes to be present to all people, offering solace and comfort, and the message of Jesus' death-and-resurrection to those ready to hear it.

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. He was crucified and rose again to break the stranglehold of personified Evil, so that this world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfillment (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World #1-2).

People are not only victims injured by the cruelty of others, trapped in the skeins of Satanic snares; adults are very often in complicity with evil in one or another of its forms. Unless we acknowledge both our weakness and responsibility for wrongdoing it is unlikely that we will overcome that selfishness that is the root of so much of the world's anguish. Thus St. Peter exhorted his listeners and ourselves: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

With Baptism we received the gift of faith, an insight into God's design for this world, and the virtue of charity, which is a power enabling us to love the Father and all creatures as Jesus did. These and all of God's spiritual gifts flow from the Paschal Mystery, the Death-and-Resurrection of Jesus. Thus we are enabled to cope with the myriad of challenges and afflictions faced by all human beings. Because gifts must be appreciated and used, it is our duty to know who we are as God's children and what we have. Prayer and faithful efforts to grow into God's life will enable us to cope with any trials that may come. Then others who see God's work in Christians, suffering the same afflictions and facing the mystery of death, may be drawn to ask for faith. The Christian vocation is to make the pattern of Jesus' response to his passion evident to every generation. "To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps" (1 Pt 2:21).

Like a lamb in his innocence facing persecution and death (Is 53:7) Jesus is also the shepherd who courageously leads his flock to safety and to pasture. Jesus describes the qualities of a good leader. "He calls his own sheep by name" (Jn 10:3); because the name represents the person, the leader should know each individual intimately. "I came so that they may have life and have it more abundantly" (10:10). Jesus offers the gift of a richer life, ordered to the service of God the Father. This fullness of life is found in intimate union with Jesus, who nourishes and encourages the individual, while making each aware of the necessity of belonging to the community of faith. "The
sheep follow him because they recognize his voice" (10:4). Listening and responding actively are the two elements of the disciples' answer to the Word in their midst. This new life is won at tremendous cost. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11). The deepest love is manifested in sacrifice, in dying to self so that others may benefit. "By his wounds you were healed" (1 Pt 2:24).

In the Gospel of John, seven statement of Jesus' work begin with the phrase "I am"; two of these occur in this passage. "I am the good shepherd" contrasts Jesus' role with that of inadequate leaders, past and present. He is the new Moses and the son of David; both of them had been shepherds before their call to guide God's people. Ultimately, Jesus reveals the loving care of his Father for humanity (see Ps 23). "I am the gate to the sheep" (10:7 and 9) instructs us that Jesus is essential to the Father's plan. This image of a gate or door through which all must enter relates to the statement at the Last Supper that Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6).

The world today desperately needs leaders willing to set aside selfish gain in order to guide people to true happiness. Every Christian vocation should exemplify the characteristics of the Good Shepherd. Each of us should renew our commitment to follow Christ, as we did on Easter Sunday. Then we should ask: "What am I doing to exercise my responsibility as a Christian leader?"