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The Christian Vocation: Follow the Shepherd

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The Christian Vocation: Follow the Shepherd

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sunday Readings for April 29, 2012 for Cycle B:

Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION: FOLLOW THE SHEPHERD

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Good Shepherd Sunday! Immediately we recall that this day is designated "Vocations Sunday" -- and for most Catholics that means "the call to the priesthood and religious life." Of course, the current shortage of vocations leads us to pray more frequently for this intention. But how many would encourage a single person in their own family to consider this calling? How many religious or priests do we find among our relatives? One has the impression that some who expect the various services of the Church to be readily available never think of the call touching them or their family.

Before discussing "vocations" in this specialized sense, we need to recall that all Christians are called to share in the Church's mission. "The faithful, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ... and carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world" (Vatican II, *The Church* #31). The anointing with chrism at our Baptism and again in Confirmation endowed us with a capacity to unite with Christ in his threefold office as priest, prophet and king. Each of these leaders in ancient Israelite history was described as a shepherd, so it is not surprising that Jesus used the image of shepherd and flock as well.

The Gospel according to John is particularly rich in this regard. Nathanael declared: "Rabbi, you are king of Israel!" (1:49). After Jesus reminded them of Moses by multiplying loaves at Passover time, the people exclaimed: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14, see Deut 18:15 and 18). The Lamb of God is the victim for the forgiveness of sin (1:29); the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (11:11, 15). The death of Jesus was not merely the execution of an innocent victim of injustice. John shows that Jesus was in control of his destiny and was the high priest offering the perfect sacrifice.

The roles of king, priest and prophet complemented each other in ancient times, all serving God and his people. King and priest were members of a dynasty, representing the people before God and exercising roles as teacher and judge. After Moses, the prophets rose to lead the community when other leaders were weak or when the Exile swept away the institutions on which king and priest depended. Ideally, the king showed the way to serve God, the prophet taught the truth when others failed to elucidate God's will adequately, and the priest mediated the divine gift of life. The succinct statement of Jesus to Thomas at the Last Supper conveys a profound synthesis: "I am the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." (14:6)

The Church prolongs the ministry of this triple office down through the centuries. Each Christian is first the recipient of the magnificent gifts of the Good Shepherd and is in need of constant guidance and care. But each person is called as well to be a collaborator with Christ and the

Church in varied dimensions of serving God the Father and the human race. Can one truly appreciate the gifts without wanting to share them? Can one treasure the way, the truth and the life without wanting to bring others to Christ? How can I best use my talents to this purpose? That question is fundamental to the search for one's vocation in life.

The unique role of the Good Shepherd in human history, so clear in the Fourth Gospel, is also central to Peter's teaching. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among human beings by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Of course, Peter is stressing the meaning of the Hebrew name Yeshua/Jesus in Greek), meaning "the Lord is Savior". The Church maintains that this conviction must be accompanied by a sensitivity to the conscience of each non-Christian. A result of the tragic misplaced zeal of some of Christians in ages past has forced Baptism upon some Jews and others. During the Middle Ages the Popes and Bishops repeatedly declared that such Baptisms were invalid and such practices unjust. The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty stated that, indeed, every person is obliged to seek the truth but also insisted on the inviolable rights of the human person to live according to his or her conscience (#1). Each of us should approach the development of our Christian vocation with a profound understanding that God's gifts are to be shared -- and a deep awareness of the past tragedies that continue to burden the Church.