

4th Sunday of Eastertide (A)

11th May 2014

‘Servant Leadership — the Good Shepherd’

Acts 2: 3000 added to their number. Ps 22: He guides me along the right path ...

1Pt 2: you had gone astray like sheep, but now ... come back to the shepherd ...

Jn 10: anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out ...

Celebrating the 4th Sunday of Eastertide always has a particular beauty to it, in my opinion. The gentle idea of Christ as the ‘Good Shepherd’ is combined with our prayers for vocations: that there may, in particular, be always new and holy, firm and committed pastors to shepherd the people of God. And yet, it is not in any way a ‘soft’ idea ... As Jesus makes clear in the Gospel today, the Good Shepherd is also the ‘gate of the sheepfold’ — literally, he lays down His life for His sheep: He becomes the ‘gate’ by lying down in the gap of the enclosure. He is the Way in, and the Way out; He is the Protector of the Flock, and He leads out the sheep to find pasture. Through biblical and Christian history we see various shepherds who were significant figures: Abraham, Moses, King David; St Patrick, St Cuthbert, St Joan of Arc, St John of God, Pope St Pius V, St Bernadette, ... the list goes on. That simple sense of determination to care for a flock of sheep has often given rise to a deep commitment to the Flock which is the Church. Even in our own age, when

many of us may feel rather distant from an agricultural existence, the age-old image of Christ as ‘Good Shepherd’ still speaks to us clearly. The Lord leads *and* the Lord serves, at one and the same time — “servant leadership,” as Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized.

Today we reflect on vocations to the priesthood and religious life: the call that God makes to young people to serve Him with their whole life. It is a high calling, to choose a way of life that sacrifices marriage and children, so as to serve a greater spouse, and give birth to children of the Spirit. And yet it is a calling that brings with it huge peace and rewards, and a joy that comes from the Lord and is eternal. To give one’s life to the Lord: to the service of His Church, is a great choice for life — the Lord is faithful in His love, and calls to His service those whom He wishes. But they must be willing to hear Him and be courageous in response.

Yesterday it was stated by the bishops of our country that some 100+ young people last year entered into training for the priesthood and religious life. And we ourselves have thankfully had some 9 ordinations to the priesthood

for Westminster in the past 12 months. The Lord's call never ceases; and even in societies like our own where the secular din threatens to drown out God's still, small voice, He calls and calls, faithfully and lovingly.

The key question, is, are we in our families allowing God's voice to be heard by the young people whom God may wish to call to special service and commitment? Of course, the vocation to marriage and family life, to bringing up children devoutly in the faith is always the more numerous calling; and it is a vital one, because devout families lead to a vibrant, prayerful parish. Also, families that are praying and attending Mass consistently are going to be more attuned to the call of God in their lives. Each and every family should want for their children only what God's plan is, for them. For some, that plan will be the joy and offering of a life as a priest, a sister, a friar or monk. If that is truly their calling — if that is what God is calling them to — then do not discount it, do not discourage them; help them make a prayerful and truthful discernment. Give them the space, the confidence, the

support, to determine if that is truly the life to which God is calling them. Each and every diocese has a 'vocations director' — often a priest, who helps those young people in the diocese who are considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. He, along with the parish priest, is the usual person to turn to in the first instance to, to assist in the process of discernment.

To foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life is not just his task, however, but is the job of us all. We must, as Catholics together, generate a climate that is *positive* about vocations. Our families, our parishes,— if we are true to our faith in Jesus the Good Shepherd — must want the Lord to provide shepherds for His people, to provide “labourers for His harvest.” In the way we speak, in the way we behave, in the way to pray, let's be certain to help our young people to hear the calling to the life Jesus wants for them. *“I have come so that they may have life; and have it to the full”!*