



Reflection for the 4th Week of Easter 2/3 May 2020 by Mgr Daniel McHugh

The Priest: The Good Shepherd

I was listening to an interview on Vatican Radio which I came across on Twitter this past week. It was one of our priests, Fr John Waters, speaking about his training to be ready to serve as a Priest in the new Nightingale Hospital at the NEC. It was most interesting: it had already struck me that Priests, who can offer the Anointing (we used to call it Extreme Unction) and Confession, as well as Holy Communion to people who are sick, have not been mentioned very much, or at all, in the coverage given to those who care for those who are in Hospital with COVID-19. The interview went through the PPE he had to wear, and the changing he would have to do in special sterile locker rooms. His enthusiasm for his “service” of the sick came across in a lovely way.

In Italy, more than 90 priests as well as dozens of missionaries, monks and nuns died with the virus, many of them worked in care homes for the elderly, hospitals and prisons, trying to offer a shred of comfort in the absence of patients loved ones and so were particularly exposed. 95 year old Fr Cirillo Longo, a respirator strapped to his face, raised both fists above his head in a gesture of celebration: “See you on the other side, in paradise” he said in his last phone call.

I thought of these priests today on the Good Shepherd Sunday, because in a real way, it gives an insight, a look at a particular dimension of a Priest’s life.

As you know, this Sunday we pray for Vocations. The Gospel leads us to reflect on the Priest, as a Shepherd like Our Lord Himself and even as the Gate to the Sheepfold. We don’t see many Shepherds these days. But, they are there of course and they need to be, to see whether the sheep are well or sick and to care for them. It is a lovely image. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks about being the Gate too. I always remember being at my Father’s place in Ireland and trying to help with gathering sheep into a pen: to get them through the opening, the gate, was not always as easy as you would imagine; there they were safe and ready to be looked after and checked over health issues.

The Gospel needs to be seen in context, and it seems to me it’s a story, a parable, related to the Pharisees, who had not accepted Jesus and led the people in the wrong way, and even tried to go by other ways, promising these would bring them into the true fold.

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The image I have of Father Waters is of the Shepherd who wants to lead the seriously ill to Jesus Himself in the Sacraments of the Sick: Jesus who is the gate as well as the Shepherd. There are, as you know, seven Sacraments, that lead us to Jesus at different moments in our lives and three of them are connected especially to the sick: Confession and Anointing (which only a Priest can do in the name of Jesus) and Holy Communion (Viaticum for the Dying).

When we are sick or near our end, these Sacraments lead us to the one gate and into the arms of the Good Shepherd. And Priests, who share this service of Our Lord the High Priest, are the ones we are invited to follow in the Gospel today. In the times of Corona, clergy have mastered unfamiliar technology, using WhatsApp and other platforms to relay the last words of dying patients to their relatives, trying to communicate with their flock, you might remember seeing the picture of one Italian priest who had populated the empty pews of his church with the pictures of his parishioners.

This leads us to reflect on Christian Leadership: Jesus' words suggest that those who lead the Christian Community should be faithful to Jesus and have a good relationship with the flock, the Christian Community. We Catholics live in blessed times: why I say that is because personally, I have lived through the priestly ministry of seven Popes: Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Francis. All very different characters, but thank God, spiritual men faithful to Jesus and caring for the flock.

We are also living through times demonstrating how good and able men do not have every type of skill required for all situations in a complex world. What they do have is that commitment to being the Good Shepherd, to caring for the Sheep, and the bringing the truths of the Gospel to the world of our day. No easy task, only the other day, Pope Francis talked about our teaching as to quote "da fastidio", "it annoys" the world, or large sections of it - That is the reality, so it is difficult to communicate the Gospel to a world that often chooses to be deaf.

Amid all of this, we have the opportunity in today's Gospel to move forward in peace, knowing we are in the safety of the care of the Good Shepherd. In the context of the Month of May and the trials of the Virus, we have this guidance from Pope Francis:

"Dear brothers and sisters, contemplating the face of Christ with the heart of Mary, our Mother, will make us even more united as a spiritual family and will help us to overcome this time of trial."

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And on Good Shepherd Sunday let us pray in particular for students for the Priesthood and those who are considering a Vocation. May they respond with generosity, rejoicing in their calling to share in a special way in the Service of Jesus, that continues to inspire Priests who do the Lord's work in different ministries today, in particular those who are giving spiritual support to those with Corona Virus, and often offer a shoulder to lean on for Doctors, Nurses and Care staff, not to mention holding the hands of those who are on their last journey.

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