

“St. John Vianney and the Basic Principles of Priestly Life”
Homily – Mass in Presence of Relic of Heart of St. John Vianney
with Priests of Archdiocese
Votive Mass of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus
March 1, 2019, St. Augustine Church
Readings: 1 Jn 4:7-16; Ps 34; Jn 10:11-18

Introduction

I would like to thank the Knights of Columbus for the extraordinary opportunity to venerate the relic of the heart of St. John Vianney here in the Archdiocese of San Francisco. This is, indeed, a great grace for us, and we owe the Knights a great debt of gratitude for it. Thank you!

In God’s Providence, the Mass we celebrate on this occasion with priests from throughout the Archdiocese occurs on the First Friday of month, the traditional day for celebrating the Votive Mass of the Sacred Heart.

The Good Shepherd

The readings for our Mass today treat of the Good Shepherd. This is the way Jesus lived out in his body the mystical meaning of his glorious pierced heart. The passage from St. John’s Gospel depicting that scene – his heart being pierced by a lance and blood and water flowing out, signifying that by his death he gives life to the Church – is the more typical one read for this Votive Mass. Today, though, we have for our Gospel reading another passage from St. John’s Gospel: Jesus’ discourse on the Good Shepherd. This image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is certainly very known and dear to us, as it has been in the whole Church from ancient times. In fact, historically it is the earliest depiction of our Lord in all of Christian art. Still visible on the walls of the catacombs of Rome is the painted image of a man with a sheep on his shoulders: the Good Shepherd. To this day, this remains among the most beloved images of our Savior.

What is meant here, though, when Jesus refers to himself as the “good” shepherd? There are two words in Greek that are translated as “good.” First there is *agathos*: this means “good” in the sense of being good at something – proficient at a trade, useful; or, of good constitution, or distinguished. The Greek word *kalos*, on the other hand, signifies noble, honorable, something with a quality of loveliness to it, beautiful inside and out; thus, it conveys the sense of purity of heart and purity of life, something well-suited to its ends.

Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd here in this sense of *kalos*. Now, from our perspective we can easily accept this, and even take it for granted, but in the time of our Lord it must have seemed strange because shepherds were considered to be among the dregs of society: thieves, marauders, uneducated – the “country bumpkin” type, but also with a reputation of being cunning and devious. That is, not at all unlike those hired hands Jesus refers to in the Gospel passage for our Mass today.

On the other hand, perhaps it is not so strange to use this term “good” in reference to the figure of the shepherd; after all, we speak of the “good thief.” But as one Scripture commentator put it, “certainly we do not affectionately refer to him as ‘the good thief’ because he was good at his trade! (Which he may have been, but ... apparently not good enough, because he got caught!)” Rather, we refer to him as “good” because he has a certain endearing quality about him, a genuine love for the Lord, and a manifestation of repentance for his life of crime.

So we see the contrast here with the bad shepherds, which must have been common in Jesus' time: they are in it for the money, they are entirely self-serving. A true shepherd, on the other hand, responds to a calling in his life; he is out with sheep, caring for them, as soon as he is old enough; he loves them as his family, and even sometimes literally has to risk laying down life for them.

In the Life of St. John Vianney

This is the call of every priest, and we certainly see it exemplified in the life of St. John Vianney. I suppose we can become easily discouraged in our own time with such widespread disregard of religion, and even outright hostility toward religion. But the situation in the time and place of St. John Vianney's life was even worse in some ways: the practice of the faith and the moral life were in shambles when he arrived at that village of Ars. That was in the wake of the French revolution, and the revolution showed its devastating effects. We often hear talk of Church renewal coming from priests seeking holiness; St. John Vianney did this in the ways that really count. He divested himself of himself, he cared not for his own comfort or convenience, but rather was totally given over to being a shepherd for his people.

We know well the long hours he would spend in the confessional, and how, when his reputation spread for being a brilliant confessor, people would travel great distances and wait hours in order for him to hear their confession. He kept his priorities straight. But he was also subject to the attacks of the devil; the devil, of course, will always attack where he sees that he is losing ground. Through it all, St. John Vianney kept his prayer life intact. Certainly, this all would have been impossible without that.

In Every Priest's Life

While St. John Vianney is held up as the model for all parish priests, it may seem unrealistic for priests today to follow his example. Yes, it is true that life today is more complicated, and there are many more demands on priests. Plus, today there are challenges arising not only from the undermining of basic principles of faith and the Church's teaching on many points of doctrine, but now of even of the most basic principles of the natural law. If we add to that the individualistic culture in which we are living, exacerbated by digital technology, we can readily admit that, yes, while in some ways St. John Vianney's situation was even more dire than ours, in other ways we are facing even deeper challenges.

It certainly becomes easy to get discouraged. A young man is full of that initial fervor when he enters the seminary; he arrives at ordination, and is full of zeal to go out and convert the world. But then, after a while, it becomes harder than he thought – he discovers the fine print, the parts of the cruise that were not in the brochure (to use two commonly employed images to convey the sense of disillusionment in one's vocation). To his surprise he finds that people use him; not all are full of good will. And then, too, he meets up with his own shortcomings, failures, and human weaknesses. He makes great sacrifices but begins to question the worth of it all – it seems that it is all for naught. When the priest allows this kind of discouragement to set in, bad habits begin to take over and good habits become corrupted; at worst, vice begins to replace virtue – starting with laziness, then moving to indifference and then to despair and then to weakening of faith. And then, imperceptibly, without even realizing it has happened, the priest becomes like a hireling.

This is when the priest leaves his vocation. No, I do not mean that he returns to the lay state; rather, his Priesthood becomes a job. He does what he needs to do to get the job done, but

lives for himself, not his people. He becomes a hireling, not a shepherd responding to God's call in his life. These struggles to some degree are inescapable; all priests have to deal with them at some time or another, to a greater or lesser degree.

Basic Principles

However, let us be clear: the basic principles don't change! The starting point is found in the First Letter of St. John, which we just heard proclaimed a moment ago: "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another" (1 Jn 4:10-11). The love of God doesn't change. The love of God must be the fuel that keeps the priest on the path of his vocation, so that he will be well-suited to the end for which God called him in this extraordinary vocation: the salvation of souls.

This means that he must keep his priorities in place: prayer, penitential practices, devotion to ministry, and so forth. Only in keeping to these basics and observing these priorities can he be brought back to that original fervor. In our hyper-secularized society, this is the only way he can dispose himself to allow God to renew him in the awesome gift that God gave him.

Conclusion

Then the priest will understand and live out the famous motto of St. John Vianney by which St. John lived his own life: "If we really understood the priest on earth, we would die not of fright but of love. . . . The Priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus."