

“From Fisherman to Shepherd”

Homily – Mass of Ordination to the Priesthood

August 1, 2020

(Readings: Numbers 11:11b-12, 14-17, 24-25a; 1 Peter 5:1-4; John 21:15-17)

Introduction

It would be considered very much of an old world idea nowadays, but it was really up until not that long ago that generation after generation of sons would follow in the footsteps of their father by practicing their father’s trade, which they would learn from him. In fact, in my family, that practice continued all the way up to my own father, who made his living as a fisherman, which trade he learned from my grandfather. Actually, though, I’m fond of saying that I am now the only grandson carrying on the family trade!

Peter’s Transformation

Which brings us to St. Peter, the fisherman who became a fisher of men. We see him earning his living as a literal fisherman for the last time in the 21st chapter of St. John’s Gospel. Remember how in this scene of St. John’s account of St. Peter’s call to follow our Lord, Peter had been out fishing with the others. Notice something curious that happens here: while he had been a fisherman, now our Lord calls him to be a shepherd. “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.”

This, too, follows an old world practice, whereby a disciple follows in the footsteps of his master. Our Lord is the Good Shepherd, who fulfills the longing expressed in the first verse of that most beloved of Psalms, which we just prayed: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” So St. Peter is going through a change of career here, from fisherman to shepherd. Or, perhaps it would be better to say that he is acquiring yet another trade, for he never stops being a fisher of men in the sense that he will win many souls over to Christ through his proclamation of the Gospel, as we read later in the Bible throughout the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, he will follow in his Master’s footsteps by doing what he did, and even by dying as he did.

What does it mean, though, to be a good shepherd? In the Bible, to “feed” sheep – to give them pasture, to tend to them – means to rule. As a shepherd “rules” his sheep, so a pastor of souls is to provide governance for his people: by leading them to good pasture, guiding them so that they will not stray away from the flock, nor approach harmful pastures, nor be seized by wolves and other wild animals. The shepherd guides, provides, and protects. So when we pray in the Good Shepherd Psalm, “the Lord is my shepherd,” what we are really praying is, “the Lord rules me.” So here we see that the biblical concept of ruling is very different from how we think of it in our modern, secular view. In the Bible, for a king to rule his subjects rightly, he must do what shepherds do when they feed their sheep. Ultimately, it comes down to love: any power which is not exercised out of love eventually becomes destructive. To feed and to tend the flock, to provide for them and protect them, is to love them.

Which is why St. Augustine can say, in commenting on this scene of the threefold questioning by our Lord and the threefold profession of faith on the part of St. Peter, that love is asked and labor is commanded. He says this because, in reality, where there is love, there is no labor.

In St. Peter's First Letter which we heard proclaimed in this Mass, we see that the transformation of the fisherman into a shepherd is complete. Notice how he tells his fellow elders to tend God's flock: "not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock." In writing to those charged with pastoral care, he speaks to them of the flock that has been *assigned* to them. This word "assigned" literally means "allotted" – a lot, a portion, an inheritance. This is Israel to God: as the God of the Covenant, God's allotted portion is Israel. The pastor of souls, then, is to shepherd the people allotted to him "as God would have it." In other words, out of love. Not as a job, as a means to a selfish end, but as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Communion

Yes, where there is love, there is no labor. But it often doesn't feel that way! Just take a look at Moses.

Notice what he says in his prayer to God when he is exasperated by the ingratitude and rebelliousness of the people: "Why are you so displeased with me that

you burden me with all this people? ... I cannot carry all this people by myself, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you will deal with me, then please do me the favor of killing me at once, so that I need no longer face this distress.” At times, every priest finds himself praying this prayer. Ben and Ian, we rejoice with you with great joy this day, but believe me, there will be days ahead when you will find yourself praying this prayer! So what is the solution? How does a priest bear such hardships when they come his way?

For Moses, the answer the Lord gave him was to assemble seventy of the elders to share in his labor. Likewise, Peter writes to his fellow elders – the word “elders” being translated in our reading literally as “presbyters.” Today we ordain two priests into the presbyteral order of the Priesthood, as distinct from the episcopal order into which the bishop is ordained. The Second Vatican Council gave emphasis to the principle that priests are ordained into a presbyterate, that is to say, a communion of priests, fellow presbyters, who share in the Priesthood of their bishop as the bishop’s principal collaborators in his diocese. The solution for the priest, then, is to exercise his Priesthood in the communion of the local Church, above all with his bishop and his brother priests. If a priest veers off into isolation, he will then tend the sheep for his own profit, whether that be material comfort, prestige, esteem, or any other motive that is not exclusively the spiritual well-being of the people assigned to him.

For many months now, we have been experiencing unique distressing hardships as we strive to stem the spread of this current pandemic. We know now all too well

the harm that isolation can cause to people's mental and spiritual health. God made us for communion, and I am ever grateful to our priests who are finding creative ways to keep in touch with their people and provide them a sense of community with their parish in order to guide them and support them in their faith. Ian and Ben, this day of your ordination will certainly be a unique chapter in the history of our Archdiocese! May it always be a reminder to you of the resourcefulness and creativity the good shepherd needs in order to provide pastoral care for his people in ever changing circumstances.

Conclusion

Thank you for your "yes" to your Master, your commitment to following in his footsteps in these very challenging and even unpredictable times. You have expressed to me your desire to be ordained above all else: that is all that matters; all else is frill. You know that – which says a lot about how you have your priorities in the right order. We cannot have the usual frills this day, but that all the more highlights what is of only true and lasting value: winning souls for Christ by loving them as a good shepherd – leading them to good pasture, providing for them, protecting them, and, ultimately, sacrificing your life for them, in imitation of your Master whom you love above all things.