

Dear Parishioners,

On this 4th Sunday of Easter we are treated to one of the most endearing images of Christ, the image of the Good Shepherd. Jesus' words and sentiments allow us to have peace, comfort and security of belonging to Him as His flock and know that He is keenly and lovingly aware of each of us. Quite a consolation during these challenging and uncertain times. This image of the shepherd and the sheep would clearly resonate with the people of Jesus' time, given their experiences and perspectives. The added inclusion of "the sheep know my voice" makes the relationship with Him more intimate. Allow me to share a personal story.

During the months of July and August 1975 I was in the novitiate stage of my religious life/priestly formation in Italy, primarily based in Verona. Since Verona in these months is hot, humid and plagued with pesky mosquitoes our novitiate group was sent to our Stigmatine Alpine home in the south Tirol near the Brenner Pass. Not too shabby! The move remains memorable for me. During this time our group daily walked the forest trails around our home and encountered the daily lives of many of the local residents. On one particular day a farmer with his small flock of sheep was letting them graze in a meadow that belonged to our Stigmatine community. When we approached the area the sheep instinctively ran towards the farmer/shepherd and tightly enclosed themselves around his legs. After exchanging a few pleasantries the shepherd said if we wanted the sheep to be comfortable with us make this call which they were familiar; it sounded like "Piffa, Piffa". Engaged I took the bait, said the words but the sheep did not budge. He laughed and told me, "don't say the words with an American accent". I swallowed the bait a second time, called out and noticed again the sheep did not move towards me; they tightened themselves around his legs. From this experience I recalled the words of Jesus, "the sheep know my voice". It is the voice of friendship, a voice of loving care and protection, a voice of total self-giving to the welfare of those entrusted to His care. That experience almost 45 years ago put flesh and life on the teaching of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which stays with me to this moment.

Today we hear many voices. So much distraction and noise invade our lives. A good deal of talk is deceptive, self-serving or agenda-ridden. In the wake of today's Gospel we are called to hear the voice of the living Christ Jesus, to listen to His words that will bring us hope and to follow Him into the bright promise of new life.

Please be assured of my prayers and God bless you.