**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (YEAR C)**

Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Pompeii; Saint Otger of Utrecht, missionary deacon; Saint Wiro of Utrecht, missionary bishop

Acts 13:14, 43-52; Ps 100; Rev 7:9, 14b-17; Jn 10:27-30

*We are his people, the sheep of his flock*

**COMMENTARY**

*The Good Shepherd-Lamb in mission*

The fourth Sunday of Easter is also called “of the Good Shepherd”, and the readings and prayers of the liturgy are focused precisely on this beautiful image of Jesus. For this reason, since 1964 following a decision by Pope Saint Paul VI, this Sunday is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, for those who have received the call to follow Jesus, the High Priest and Good Shepherd. In this perspective, today many parishes and dioceses around the world organizes the collection for the universal solidarity fund of the Pontifical Society of St. Peter the Apostle (PSSPA) for the formation of priests and consecrated persons, through the support of seminaries and novitiates in the mission territories with their candidates and formators. Thus, every faithful participates actively, with prayer and concrete contribution, in the evangelization mission of the Church, concretely in caring for vocations and formation of new good priests - shepherds with the “odor of the sheep” in the footsteps of Christ the Good Shepherd (Pope Francis, *Chrism* *Mass*, *Homily*, Saint Peter’s Basilica, Holy Thursday, 28 March 2013).

In such a context, today’s Mass readings help us to reaffirm and deepen at least three important aspects of the mission of Christ the Shepherd, a model, according to God’s will and example, of all the shepherds of God’s people.

1. *The particular relationship between Jesus and his sheep*

The Gospel passage today is very concise, but full of implications. It represents a kind of summary of Jesus’ earlier discourse in the Fourth Gospel around his self-declaration “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11, 14). Responding now to the Jews who ask for a definitive manifestation of his messianic identity, Jesus simply reaffirms a fundamental characteristic of the relationship between him and his sheep: “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (Jn 10:27). The words here echo what Jesus said earlier in his self-declaration of being a good shepherd, as in the acclamation before the Gospel: “I am the good shepherd, [says the Lord,] and I know mine and mine know me” (Jn 10:14).

Here, the verb “to know” in the Biblical-Jewish language denotes a knowledge that is not so much intellectual (to have information about something) as existential, as is the relationship between husband and wife. It is about intimate and integral mutual knowledge, a knowing that implies loving and belonging to one another. Precisely for this reason, when Jesus declared that he was a good shepherd, he explained further that “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11b, 15b). He does this, because he *knows* his sheep, that is, he loves them deeply, more than his own life.

Furthermore, the knowledge between Jesus and his sheep is paralleled with that between Jesus and God the Father. He affirms, in fact, “I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn 10:14b-15). The relationship between Jesus the Good Shepherd and his disciples is therefore placed in comparison with the mystical reality of intimate knowledge between the two divine Persons. So, on the one hand, here we can glimpse the depth of the knowledge-love Jesus has for his sheep, like that which Jesus has for the Father! Jesus actually states elsewhere, “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love “(Jn 15: 9). On the other hand, when Jesus affirms that his sheep know him, we can ask ourselves whether our knowledge for Jesus is actually comparable to that between the Father and Jesus. The statement, therefore, can also be seen as an implicit invitation to Jesus’ “sheep” for a serious self-examination of whether and how much they know their Shepherd and recognize his voice in the midst of the noises all around. Since one never runs out of all the riches of the mystery of Christ, the commitment to grow more and more in the knowledge of the Shepherd, who knows and loves them to the point of giving his life for them, remains always relevant for the sheep of all times. (Significant in this regard is Jesus’ reproach to Philip, one of his close disciples: “Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip?” (Jn 14: 9). These words are also valid for every disciple who follows him).

With regard to the relationship between Jesus and his sheep, we should finally recall the mysterious affirmation of Jesus himself alluding to his universal mission: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (Jn 10:16). Thus, Jesus the good shepherd always goes beyond any usual “fence” to gather and guide the other scattered sheep who await his voice. He always goes on a mission, following God’s plan revealed through the prophet Isaiah on the vocation of the Servant of God: “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach *to the ends of the earth*” (Is 49:6). These are the words that the apostles of Jesus like Paul and Barnabas recalled to begin proclaiming the Gospel to the pagans (cf. Acts 13:47), as we heard in the first reading. They were missionaries who continued the mission of Jesus the good shepherd!

2. *I Give Them Eternal Life*

Reaffirming the particular relationship with his sheep, Jesus states further his special care which comes from such knowledge and love: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand” (Jn 10:28). The eternal life mentioned here does not designate a future reality *only* after death. It indicates life in communion with Jesus and with God, which begins already in the present and will continue into eternity. So much so that Jesus underlines, “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes *has* eternal life.” (Jn 6:47). Similarly, “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me *has* eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life” (Jn 5:24). Moreover, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (Jn 6:54).

From these quotations, especially the last one, we see another fundamental aspect of the eternal life Jesus gives to his sheep. That “eternal life” is exactly Jesus’ own life He offers, as made explicit in the declaration of the good shepherd mentioned above (“A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” [Jn 10:11b, 15b]). Therefore, Jesus also made himself a sacrificial lamb to give his life to his sheep and lead them “to springs of life-giving water” (Rev 7:17), as the second reading reminds us.

Jesus is the shepherd who not only knows the odor of the sheep, but has also made himself one of them, to share everything of life with them, everything including death! This is what is stated for the figure of Christ the high priest: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

This strong bond between Jesus the good shepherd and his sheep will be the reason why “no one can take them out” (Jn 10:28) of his hand and of Father’s hand. Just as Saint Paul the Apostle expresses the same concept with moving inspired words starting from a rhetorical question: “What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:35, 37-39).

3. *The Father and I Are One*

After reiterating the two fundamental aspects of the special bond between Jesus the Shepherd and his sheep, Jesus finally reveals his particular union with God the Father: “The Father and I are one” (Jn 10:30).

The quoted statement seems to have little relevance to the good shepherd theme discussed so far. However, it actually turns out to be the apex of Jesus’ self-revelation regarding his identity in general, and his “mission” as a shepherd in particular.

He is the good shepherd, just as God is the good shepherd of his people (cf., for example, Ez 34; Ps 23). Their unity and communion of operation, intention, love is emphasized. And this unity and communion Jesus now desires also for all his disciples-sheep, especially for those called, like Peter and others, to the mission of shepherding his sheep. Indeed, he implored the Father, “so that [his disciples] may be one, as we are one” (Jn 17:22).

Let us therefore listen again, in conclusion, to this moving voice of Christ, who prays to the Father for us, his sheep, so that we may feel and know more and more his heart, the heart of the good shepherd, all zealous for the mission of the Father: “[Father!] I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me , and that you loved them even as you loved me”(Jn 17:20-23).

*Useful points to consider:*

**JOHN PAUL II,** Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day, ***Pastores Dabo Vobis***

18. As the Council points out, “the spiritual gift which priests have received in ordination does not prepare them merely for a limited and circumscribed mission, but for the fullest, in fact the universal, mission of salvation to the end of the earth. The reason is that every priestly ministry shares in the fullness of the mission entrusted by Christ to the apostles.” By the very nature of their ministry they should therefore be penetrated and animated by a profound missionary spirit and “with that truly Catholic spirit which habitually looks beyond the boundaries of diocese, country or rite to meet the needs of the whole Church, being prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere.”

23. (…) The gift of self, which is the source and synthesis of pastoral charity, is directed toward the Church. This was true of Christ who “loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25), and the same must be true for the priest. With pastoral charity, which distinguishes the exercise of the priestly ministry as an amoris officium, “the priest, who welcomes the call to ministry, is in a position to make this a loving choice, as a result of which the Church and souls become his first interest, and with this concrete spirituality he becomes capable of loving the universal Church and that part of it entrusted to him with the deep love of a husband for his wife.” The gift of self has no limits, marked as it is by the same apostolic and missionary zeal of Christ, the good shepherd, who said: “And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn. 10:16).

32. Membership in and dedication to a particular church does not limit the activity and life of the presbyterate to that church: A restriction of this sort is not possible, given the very nature both of the particular church and of the priestly ministry. In this regard the Council teaches that “the spiritual gift which priests received at their ordination prepares them not for any limited or narrow mission but for the widest scope of the universal mission of salvation ‘to the end of the earth’ (Acts 1:8). For every priestly ministry shares in the universality of the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles.”

It thus follows that the spiritual life of the priest should be profoundly marked by a missionary zeal and dynamism. In the exercise of their ministry and the witness of their lives, priests have the duty to form the community entrusted to them as a truly missionary community. As I wrote in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, “all priests must have the mind and heart of missionaries open to the needs of the Church and the world, with concern for those farthest away and especially for the non - Christian groups in their own area. They should have at heart, in their prayers and particularly at the eucharistic sacrifice, the concern of the whole Church for all of humanity.”

If the lives of priests are generously inspired by this missionary spirit, it will be easier to respond to that increasingly serious demand of the Church today which arises from the unequal distribution of the clergy. In this regard, the Council was both quite clear and forceful: “Let priests remember then that they must have at heart the care of all the churches. Hence priests belonging to dioceses which are rich in vocations should show themselves willing and ready, with the permission or at the urging of their own bishop, to exercise their ministry in other regions, missions or activities which suffer from a shortage of clergy.”

**JOHN PAUL II,** Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World, ***Pastores Gregis***

22. (…) Communion, in its Trinitarian source and model, is always expressed in mission. Mission is the fruit and the logical consequence of communion. The dynamic process of communion is favoured by openness to the horizons and demands of mission, always ensuring the witness of unity so that the world may believe and making ever greater room for love, so that all people may attain to the Trinitarian unity from which they have come forth and to which they are destined. The more intense communion is, the more mission is fostered, especially when it is lived out in the poverty of love, which is the ability to go forth to meet any person or group or culture with the power of the Cross, our *spes unica* and the supreme witness to the love of God, which is also manifested as a universal love of our brothers and sisters.

66. In sacred Scripture the Church is compared to a flock ‘‘which God himself foretold that he would shepherd, and whose sheep, even though governed by human shepherds, are continuously led and nourished by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd and the Prince of Shepherds’’.Does not Jesus himself call his disciples a *pusillus grex* and exhort them not to fear but to have hope (cf. *Lk* 12:32)? Jesus often repeated this exhortation to his disciples: “In the world you will have fear; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world!” (*Jn* 16:33). As he was about to return to the Father, he washed the feet of the Apostles and said to them: “Let not your hearts be troubled,” and added: “I am the way... No one comes to the Father, but by me” (cf. *Jn* 14:1-6). On this “way” which is Christ, the little flock, the Church, has set out, and is led by him, the Good Shepherd, who, “when he has brought out all his own, goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (*Jn* 10:4).

In the image of Jesus Christ, and following in his footsteps, the Bishop also goes forth to proclaim him before the world as the Saviour of mankind, the Saviour of every man and woman. As a missionary of the Gospel, he acts in the name of the Church, which is an expert in humanity and close to the men and women of our time. Consequently, the Bishop, with the strength which comes from the radicalism of the Gospel, also has the duty to unmask false conceptions of man, to defend values being threatened by ideological movements and to discern the truth. With the Apostle he can repeat: “We toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe” (*1 Tim* 4:10).

The Bishop’s activity should thus be marked by that *parrhesía* which is the fruit of the working of the Spirit (cf. *Acts* 4:31). Leaving behind his very self in order to proclaim Jesus Christ, the Bishop takes up his mission with confidence and courage, *factus pontifex*, becoming in truth a ‘‘bridge’’ which leads to every man and women. With the burning love of a shepherd he goes out in search of the sheep, following in the footsteps of Jesus who says: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also and they will hear my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd” (*Jn* 10:16).

**PAUL VI**, *Radio Message for the 1st World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, April 11, 1964

“*Pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers*” for his Church (cf. Mt 9:38).

Casting an anxious gaze over the endless expanse of green spiritual fields, which all over the world await priestly hands, the heartfelt invocation to the Lord springs from our soul, according to Christ's invitation. Yes, today as then, “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (ibid. 9:37): few, compared to the increased needs of pastoral care; few, in the face of the needs of the modern world, in the face of its quivers of restlessness, its needs for clarity and light, which require teachers and fathers who are understanding, open, updated; few, yet, in the face of those who, although distant, indifferent, or hostile, still want in the priest a living irreproachable model of the doctrine, which he professes. And above all these priestly hands are scarce in the mission fields, wherever there are people to catechize, to help, to console.

Therefore, may this Sunday, which in the Roman Liturgy takes the name of the Good Shepherd from the Gospel, see united in a single heartbeat of prayer the generous hosts of Catholics from all over the world, to invoke from the Lord the workers necessary for his harvest.