

“The Consecrated Life: Being Sheep and Shepherds for the People of the Lamb”
Homily for Mass in Celebration of Jubilarians in the Consecrated Life
April 17, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Introduction

Our annual Mass to honor the Jubilarians in consecrated life this year coincides with what we popularly refer to as Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on this fourth Sunday of Easter the Gospel reading is an excerpt from the discourse of our Lord in the Gospel of Saint John, in which he teaches about himself as the Good Shepherd. Appropriately so, for consecrated persons imitate the Lord Jesus, very much so, in this pastoral imagery as shepherd, but also in the role of sheep. Yes, even Jesus, in a sense, demonstrates himself in the role, not quite of a sheep, but of a lamb. We hear in the book of Revelation in our second reading, “The lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them.” That’s a rather peculiar image, isn’t it? The lamb is also the shepherd.

Sheep and Shepherds

Those who pursue union with the Lord in consecrated life associate themselves to the Lord Jesus in this way, first of all as sheep. I suppose nowadays the idea of referring to people as sheep has a rather negative connotation. Some people see it as a putdown, thinking as sheep people who can’t think for themselves, or who are easily duped into following anyone, anywhere.

Listen to what our Lord says in the Gospel: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. No one can take them out of my hand. The sheep know their shepherd’s voice.” I would imagine many of you are aware of what scripture commentators tell us about shepherds out in the fields: each shepherd has a particular call to his sheep that the sheep recognize, and will so follow him. When it would happen that two shepherds might encounter each other out in the fields, they might sit down and visit with each other for a while and rest, enjoy their company and some conversation, and the sheep intermingle with each other. Then when it comes time for them to get up and go, they don’t need to keep track of whose is which sheep. They just utter their call. The sheep recognize a voice and separate, following their shepherd.

The shepherd is the one who cares for the sheep. He knows each of them. The sheep are not some sort of nameless or mindless member of a vast flock. And so the consecrated person pursues union with the Lord with the single-hearted search for following him. They are the ones who can distinguish his voice from among the many competing voices in this world, who follow him unreservedly, and no one can take them out of his hand. The sheep who, you might say, hang out with the shepherd know him and follow him, and know they will be safe with him. It is precisely because of that, that consecrated persons can also exercise a role of shepherding God’s people. They know him and can follow his voice; therefore, they can guide others there.

They continue the work of the Church begun with the Apostles. We hear about this throughout the Easter season in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. We see today that the Apostles experienced both failure and success in proclaiming the Gospel.

The Lord never did give a promise of success, did he? He gave us a commandment to proclaim the Gospel. And he gave a promise, too. The promise wasn't one of success. The promise was that he would be with us until he returns.

Radical Openness

What is important is that his word be proclaimed faithfully, without distortions, without falsifications, but pure. We've all at times met failure; that would be the cost of our fidelity to him and the proclamation of his word. But we will also at times, by his grace, meet with success. Sometimes that success will come in surprising quarters, as happened to the Apostles we heard about today. They were not expecting that the Gentiles would be the ones to be open to the word and receiving it, rather than many of their own people.

Consecrated persons are the protagonists in the Church, of carrying out this work of the Church. You do so more than simply with words. It's good for us to reflect on this in this Year of Mercy, and how the witness and role of consecrated persons in our Archdiocese has brought mercy down into the concrete from the very beginning of our local church - both the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. We think about the corporal works of mercy which we get from Matthew, chapter 25, that parable of the last judgment: for, indeed, those in consecrated life in our Archdiocese have exercised ministry to the homeless, to immigrants, to refugees, to victims of human trafficking, giving them a safe home, nourishment, shelter, love. The hospitals and hospices and other homes for the sick that they have built up and maintained. Reaching out to those afflicted with disease, to addicts. Visiting and caring for those who have been detained in prisons and in jails. Caring for those who are bereaved.

Of course, the spiritual works of mercy as well: most especially in catechesis and counseling services, in pastoral presence to those seeking to find their way back to the Lord, or seeking to find him in the first place. Being present and showing love and care to people in moments of confusion or loss or pain.

This all comes about because of a radical openness to others. But it is not for any kind of glory seeking, or self-gratification, or to have esteem in the eyes of others. Rather, this radical openness to others comes out of an openness to *the* other. The "Other" with a capital "O." The point, really – now, I may be getting myself in hot water here – but the point is not really to make the world a better place, even if that is a very important part of it, and it is certainly a happy side benefit. But as important as that is, it is only relatively so.

What is of ultimate importance, and in the end the only thing that is important, the one necessary thing, we hear about again in this passage from Revelation in our second reading. We hear about this great multitude standing before the throne and before the lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands, that these are the ones who survived the time of great distress. This is referring to the martyrs, those who have washed their robes white in the blood of the lamb, and holding palm branches, obviously a sign of their victory through their martyrdom. They emerge victorious from their trial. They have shared the same fate as their Lord.

This is the mystery of martyrdom that turns woe into joy. Because of this they have the greatest blessing of all, which is simply to be in God's presence. They stand before the throne of God, and before the lamb.

The pursuit of consecrated life certainly involves much self-denial. The consecrated person renounces relative goods for the one ultimate good: to be in God's presence, and to be a light to others to guide them there.

Conclusion

I wish to take this opportunity again, on behalf of our entire Archdiocese, to thank you for your invaluable presence in our midst, for the ministry of mercy you exercise in so many ways throughout our archdiocese. May God bless you, and may God bless you with many more vocations. Through your witness, may many young people choose the path of a more perfect following of Christ with single-hearted devotion, recognizing his voice, and following him wherever he leads them.

I offer special congratulations to our Jubilarians today, whom we are so happy to honor. What a joy it is for us to have you here today, to honor you on this happy occasion.