

“The *Real* ‘Real Thing’”
Homily for the 4th Sunday of Easter, Year “A”
May 3, 2020
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption

Most Rev. Salvatore J. Cordileone

Introduction

As we continue to shelter in place in the counties here in our Archdiocese and around the Bay, we continue to suffer the hardships of not being able to be physically present to each other. As I was reflecting on this the other day, the thought came to my mind that, although we now have the means to visit with each other through video as well as audio technology, it’s just not the same. FaceTime and Zoom may help somewhat, but in comparison to physical presence, they are no substitute. It is just not the real thing.

When that thought entered my mind, “it’s not the real thing,” a song came to my mind that was quite popular when I was very young. Now, those of you who are earlier on in life right now have to understand that people my age and older, when we were growing up – no matter where we were in geographically in the country – we all grew up with Motown. The song that came to my mind is the Motown classic “Ain’t Nothing Like the Real Thing.” In it, Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell – themselves two iconic figures of the era – sing of a couple in love who are suffering the pain of physical separation. Nothing can substitute for being physically together: not a picture of the loved one, not a letter, not memories nor the imagination. At the end of the song they are reunited in being physically present to each other, and even musically the song changes to reflect this happiness.

Physical Presence: A Pastor’s Perspective

I can’t help but think of the hardship, and even the pain, that so many families are experiencing at this time because they cannot experience the “real thing” of being physically present with each other. I think of the pain of families who have a loved one who is gravely ill, and they cannot be at their loved one’s side. All the more so, I think of the pain of those who cannot be with their loved one in the loved one’s dying moments. Audio-visual technology, yes, may help a little bit. But there is nothing that can ease the pain of not being able to be at your loved one’s side in their dying moment, to hold their hand and kiss them goodbye. Likewise, I am well aware of the pain our people are suffering at not being able to be physically present at the celebration of Mass, and access the core and foundation of our lives as Catholics, the Most Holy Eucharist.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday, as the Gospel reading is always taken from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of St. John, in which Jesus teaches at length using the image of the shepherd, and refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. I would like, then, to give you something of a pastor’s perspective on physical distancing.

As pastors of souls, we are the shepherds of Christ’s people. And just as the people need the presence of their pastor, so the pastor needs the presence of his people. It is our very instinct to be with God’s people. That is why we have the vocation to be priests in pastoral ministry.

We do not have the call to be monks or to live our Priesthood in any way other than, ultimately, interacting with the people of God to help them make progress on the path to salvation. I assure you that your priests, too, are suffering at not being able to be with you and go about the ministry that defines the duties incumbent to their vocation. They, too, are anxious to resume celebrating the sacraments for you in person, to help prepare you for receiving the sacraments, to give you instruction, to lead Bible studies, to counsel you, to build up the Body of Christ that is the community of the parish. The same is true for those of us called to exercise our Priesthood in the episcopal order. I think of how this time of the year is otherwise filled with celebrations of Confirmation, which bring me into your own parish communities at that significant moment in the life of any parish. I think of the celebration for our priest jubilarians that the priests of the Archdiocese celebrate together every year in May, but which cannot take place this year. And the greatest joy in my ministry as a bishop, celebrating ordinations, will not be happening at this time. The ordinations have to be postponed.

Thinking of the day-to-day life of the pastor of souls reminds me of what Pope Francis told our group of bishops in January when we met with him for our *ad limina* visit in Rome, which bishops make every five years or so. He spoke about how the pastor has to be always in movement: he has to be behind the flock to make sure none of the sheep wander off and get lost or get left behind; he must be in the midst of the flock to guide them and care for them, remaining close to them; and he must be in front of the flock to lead them in the direction they have to go. The literal shepherd in the field is always in movement: after the sheep have finished grazing, he has to move them on to greener pastures. And so the shepherd of souls must move God's people on to the greener pastures of deeper life in Christ.

We hear our Lord using this image in the Gospel reading for today's Mass, which consists of the opening verses of John chapter ten: "... the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him." The sheep follow him: the shepherd is not wandering; he is leading the sheep in a determined direction, to a determined destination. This reminds us of other provocative images Pope Francis is fond of using: the pastor "having the smell of the sheep," creating a "culture of encounter," "accompanying" the people of God on their journey of faith.

Following the Shepherd's Voice

Pastoral presence, then, is not static: the shepherd is always in movement within the flock, and leading the flock onwards. Onwards to where? To answer that question, we need look no further than the first reading for today's Mass.

The scene is the day of Pentecost. Those first disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, leave the Upper Room to go forth and proclaim the Good News. Peter then delivers the first homily in the history of the Church. His listeners are deeply moved, and they ask the apostles what they are to do. How does Peter respond? He does not say, "Be nice to one another." He doesn't tell them not to worry about it, because God loves them just the way they are. He does not even tell them to be tolerant and inclusive, even though the audience is as diverse as can be imagined and are about to be incorporated into the one community of believers. Instead, what does he say? "Repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins." The first word in response to those who have accepted the faith after hearing the first homily in the history of the Church is the

Homily, 4th Sunday of Easter, Year “A”

same first word preached by our Lord in his public ministry: “repent.” The Book of Acts tells us that the people were “cut to the heart”: Peter’s preaching awakened for them the consciousness of sin, which then moved them to repentance – always the necessary disposition for receiving forgiveness. The pastor, then, encounters God’s people not to leave them where they are, but to lead them to green pastures: repentance of their sins and the healing grace of God’s forgiveness. In other words, he is in movement among them in order to lead them down the path of holiness of life.

This, though, involves another critical element: “... the sheep hear [the shepherd’s] voice, [and] he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.” To choose the right path and walk in the right direction means following the right voice: that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And there are certainly very many competing voices in the world, calling us to follow a very different and destructive path, but concealing it with the allure of happiness, but a false happiness. Yes, there are many strange voices, many thieves and robbers who climb over the gate, who sneak in to confuse our minds and our hearing and so lure us away from the one who truly loves us and wants, and is capable of giving, what is best for us.

He is the one who Peter says, in our first reading, is the “shepherd and guardian” of our souls. “Shepherd,” that is, pastor; “guardian” – the word is *episcopos*, from which we get the word “bishop,” but literally means an “overseer.” The Risen Lord exercises his pastoral care and governance of us through his ordained priests and bishops. Please pray for us: we, especially, must recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, so we can echo that voice to the whole Church. And please pray for vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life. Appropriately enough, this Fourth Sunday of Easter every year is designated as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Please pray for such vocations, that the Lord will increase in both number and zeal those who choose to follow him as the Good Shepherd, laying down their lives for his people. If you are following this Mass on the YouTube channel, you will find the Prayer for Vocations beneath the video image. I invite you to pray it with me, together, and the conclusion of the Prayer of the Faithful, and also to pray it regularly on your own.

Conclusion

Only physical presence is the “real thing.” And while we suffer without it at this time, let us take this as a sign from our Lord for us to check our hearing. Let us run away from the strangers, who are imposters – thieves and robbers – and together hear the voice of the one who literally loves us to death – his own death – so that might we have life. Let us trust that through this time of trial and distress, he is leading us to the greener pastures of a purified and deeper life in him.