

This 4th Sunday of Easter, also called “Good Shepherd Sunday” hasn’t arrived a moment too soon and could not have come at a more needed time in our lives! Today we hear Jesus’ words of comfort and assurance: “***I am the sheep-gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe. You will go in and out and find pasture. ... I came that you might have life, and have it to the full!***”

As disciples of Jesus, with our Good Shepherd, guiding us, we can be sure that – even in these most unstable and frightening times, we are sheltered in God’s loving and merciful care. *There could be no better place in which to shelter!* And, whether we are called to be *in* the confines of our homes or to be *out* on the front lines doing essential work in the community, with Jesus, we will find “pasture” – through God’s grace and our coming together with other people of good will, our essential needs are and will continue to be met — as we are experiencing every day, through the generous commitment of untold numbers of friends and neighbors, creative ways are emerging to help feed, heal, house, ...”mask,” comfort, educate, entertain, pray for and worship with our extended networks of sisters and brothers. Jesus’ words reassure us that in his company ultimately “all will be well.” And that is a message to hold to and treasure these days.

As our Psalm 23 proclaims, in these troubled days, we can trust our Shepherd to give us repose in verdant pastures; to lead us beside restful waters; to refresh our soul. ... even in this dark valley, we need fear no evil; for our Shepherd is with us ...with rod and staff that give us courage... Only goodness and kindness will follow us all our days; And we will dwell in the house of the Shepherd for years to come. DEEP BREATH!! This too will pass... All will be well!

I think it’s always wonderful and important to remember that this beautiful Psalm directly follows and answers the lament of Psalm 22, cried out by Jesus in his final agony on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” It does my heart good to remember that both then and now the answer to the pain and suffering of the Cross is the sure and certain presence of the Good Shepherd...

Good Shepherd Sunday is also celebrated as Vocation Sunday: a time to reflect deeply on how God calls each and every one of us to serve one another and build the Reign of God on earth as in heaven. We *ALL* — as single persons, in marriage or committed partnerships; as parents; in religious or ordained life – in *all that we do* in our daily lives: at home, work, school or in the community... both within and outside of “church” — have a “vocation” – a calling from God. As the late Jesuit Cardinal Carlo-Maria Montini puts it: for each one of us, our vocation involves discerning *what it is that God wants to bring about through me* – what “masterwork for Creation” does God intend through my existence... !

Among the many things we are learning through this Covid-19 Pandemic, as we reflected on last week, is renewed appreciation of the vocations of our “service” workers and all those who routinely get their “hands dirty” to keep the rest of us healthy and society functioning. Such are God’s “masterworks”!!

In its impact on our practice as Catholic Christians too, in this time of “suspended” gatherings for mass, this pandemic – like perhaps nothing before it – has opened space for deep reflection on the question of vocation within our institutional church. Our current inability to gather for mass and communion, has caused us here to share for a time in the experience that is ongoing for some three-fifths of our sisters and brothers around the globe. **Lack of regular and frequent access to sacraments is the norm for many, if not most, members of the Church.** I think that bears repeating: **Lack of regular and frequent access to sacraments is the norm for many, if not most, members of the Church** and, that is a source of deep pain and longing.

This Easter Season, we, for perhaps the first time in our lives, are experiencing this real pain and longing for sacramental unity as individuals and as an entire church family.

Here at All Saints and the Diocese of Syracuse, we are already planning for how – after the ravishes of this pandemic – we will come together once again for communal worship around the Table of the Lord. As we imagine that future, I invite us to unite our current experience of pain and longing for the Eucharist with that of the many for who that pain has been and remains ongoing; as well as with the pain and longing of those women and married men among us, for who fulfillment of their *vocation* – their God-given call to the priesthood – has been ruled illegitimate and unattainable.

As our Fr. Andy would remind us, among the gifts of the Second Vatican Council was the call to the institutional church to dialogue with the contemporary world and to recognize the need to “*Respond to present needs with present knowledge...*”

As we are learning, it is this kind of attitude that is called for and is working in combatting the global viral pandemic to bring human society back to a healthy balance ...

AND it is what is called for and – we have every reason to believe will work – in combatting the legalism and patriarchy built into the institutional church to bring the Body of Christ back into a healthy balance.

This “Good Shepherd”/Vocation Sunday and into the future, let us pray for one another that each one of us discovers in full measure the role we are to play in building the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven, and that we – with the Hierarchy – hear the Holy Spirit’s call to ordained ministry in ways that transcend the barriers that currently deny the sacraments to so many, ... Let us be open to ways of being church that fulfill – for ALL God’s daughters and sons – our Good Shepherd’s words: “*I came that you might have life, and have it to the full!*”

Amen!