



***The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep...*** The fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate the Risen Lord as the Good shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep. We can understand from this the kind of relationship Jesus had with His disciples; a relationship based on tenderness, love, mutual knowledge and the promise of an immeasurable gift, as He said “I came, that they may have life, have it in abundance.” Jesus emphasizes the unique character of the good shepherd that is laying down his life for the sheep. What shepherd would sacrifice his own life for his sheep?

He can acquire more sheep but has only one life. Jesus makes a free, voluntary gift of His life on the cross, through which sheep come to receive life in abundance. His self-gift on the cross is a perfect act of love, the greatest expression of love and the perfect example of His teaching that laying down one’s life for another. Self sacrificial love is the defining standard for all disciples of Jesus and especially for those appointed to be shepherd of His flock. For, it is that self-offering that Jesus’ shepherding finds its culmination. Whereas the hired hand knows that his life is more valuable than a mere sheep. For him the essential fact is that ‘the sheep do not belong to him.’ So, there is a lack of will and courage to stay with the flock in its moment of peril. His relationship with the sheep is mercenary. He is just interested more in his own welfare than the welfare of the sheep.

Jesus, also represents this shepherding in an absolute and exclusive way, is evident in His knowledge of the sheep. Jesus makes an important and powerful comparison. He compares the mutual knowing of shepherd and sheep (I know my own and my own know me) to the mutual knowing within God (just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father). The relationship of the Father and Son is one of unity and eternal love, which is the most radical self-giving. In scripture, to know a person means, not just to recognize someone but to possess that person, to be one with that person. So, God’s knowledge means that He adopts people into fellowship, cares about their lot, chooses them as His own, enters into a personal relationship with them and calls them to His service. And people’s knowledge of God means that they know him as their God and themselves as adopted and called by Him and accordingly, they act in faith, in the consciousness of being called, in obedience. When Jesus as the Good Shepherd says that He knows those who are His, and they know Him, He represents in His own person that special relationship between God and His people; in Him God is concerned about His people as the people of His own possession. In Jesus God fulfills His promise that He Himself will shepherd His people by appointing one shepherd over them, so that in Jesus the sheep of God’s flock will know God and hear God’s voice.

Brothers and sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, we all have a vocation; to be a good shepherd and a good sheep. Everyone who is entrusted with the care of others is a shepherd. Pastors, parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials and so on, are all shepherds. We become good shepherds by loving, caring, praying and spending our time, talents and treasures for their welfare and not ours. And, we become good sheep by hearing the voice and following the teachings of Jesus the Good Shepherd that come to us through the scriptures, ministers, pastors of the Church and each other. Our vocation is to love the sheep to the point of laying down one’s life for them and live in an intimate and mutual relationship with them.