

**Homily – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B –  
St. Monica's: April 25-26, 2015  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations / Confirmation Retreat**

**Acts 4:8-12:** We are saved in the name of Jesus.

**Psalm 118:** The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone: give thanks, for God's love is everlasting.

**I John 3:1-2:** Our fundamental identity: We are God's children.

**John 10:11-18:** Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows and loves his flock, brings about their unity, lays down his life for his sheep.

Today, on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is placed before us, as the Church marks the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. I do not need to remind you that priests and religious are not the only people with "vocations". We have all been called into life by a loving God, who invites us through our baptism to become followers of Jesus, to grow in holiness, and to share in his mission of proclaiming his Gospel in word and example, whatever our talents and limitations, whatever our work or state in life. I take that as a given.

Today's Gospel speaks about one aspect of the mission to which Jesus has called us: the task of shepherding. From Jesus' perspective, what constitutes a "good" shepherd? First of all, shepherding is far more than "a job", a set of tasks to be fulfilled. The Good Shepherd cares *personally* for each of the sheep: he knows each of his sheep by name, they know his voice, and they follow him. There is a bond of trust. Good shepherds have a special love and concern for the sheep who has gone astray, the ones who need them the most. In times of danger, they do not run away; if necessary, they will not hesitate to put their own lives on the line for them. This is the kind of shepherd Jesus is: unlike the thief who comes to kill and destroy, unlike the hired hands who "do the job", but with no real care or commitment, Jesus comes "that we might have life, and have it in abundance." (John 10:10)

One of my favourite books on ministry is called *The Lost Art of Walking on Water: Reimagining the Priesthood*, by Fr. Michael Heher. At one point, he writes: "*Everybody knows we priests are busy, but I don't think this is how we want our people to think about us. We want*

*them to know that we love them, that we are there for them in the ups and downs of their daily lives. This relationship is personal, not merely functional. We are not mere sacramental machines; we have been entrusted with the care of souls.*” To this, I say: **Amen!** Yet how often, when I am asked how I am doing, or how I enjoy being at St. Monica’s, I catch myself repeating a list of all the “things” I am doing. I sometime wonder who exactly I’m trying to impress!

This is not just an issue for priests or religious. Just as each one of us has a vocation – our task is to name it, claim it, and follow it as best we can – so too each of us, in one way or another, is called to be a shepherd. I am thinking of those members of our parish who, over the past year, have been meeting to develop a mentoring program to assist and support and build bridges between the generations. It is also true for our young people who today have experienced a special day of retreat in preparation for their upcoming Confirmation, and for those who have led them through this.

This shepherding can take many different forms. As parent, spouse, caring friend, supportive co-worker, encouraging mentor, concerned citizen, involved parishioner, pastoral visitor – we find ourselves in a position where we can make a positive difference, where we can nurture someone else’s growth.

This can be a scary thought, especially when we lack confidence in ourselves, when we are so consumed by our limitations that we do not see our own gifts. Sometimes we shy away from the challenge: we bury our talent in the ground, we do not allow it to bear fruit in others. Or we hide behind our busyness with more mundane tasks, as a reason not to get involved. Or again, if we do get involved, we “perform the service,” but we do it at “arm’s length”, afraid to take the risk of investing ourselves personally in the lives of those we serve.

What kind of shepherds does the Church need today? What vision of leadership needs to inspire us, if we are to follow the invitation Jesus gives us to become “shepherds after his own heart”? In his book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, the late Fr. Henri Nouwen tells the story of his own conversion to what he calls the model of “servant-leadership”.

Fr. Nouwen was a successful university professor at Harvard, Yale, and Notre Dame; he was a popular retreat preacher, conference speaker, and best-selling spiritual author. His books reached millions. Yet he felt disconnected, restless, empty in his deepest self. He found himself complaining about being too busy – yet lonely and rejected when people did not phone or write. To the surprise of many, he resigned from his academic posts, and became the pastor of the *Daybreak* L'Arche home in Toronto, living in community with physically and mentally handicapped persons along the model developed by their founder, Jean Vanier. He writes:

*“My movement from Harvard to L'Arche made me aware in a new way how much my own thinking about Christian leadership had been affected by the desire to be relevant, popular, and powerful. The truth is, however, that these are not vocations but temptations. Jesus asks “not how much can you do,” but “do you love me?” Jesus asks not, “how popular are you,” but “feed my sheep.” Jesus asks not, “how powerful a leader are you,” but “how willing are you to stretch out your hands and to be led where you do not want to go.”*

Jesus invites us also to move from a concern for relevance to a life of prayer, from worries about popularity to a communal and mutual ministry, and from a leadership built on power to one based on vulnerability, in which we critically discern together where God is leading us.” This is that leadership “in the name of Jesus” looks like.

We have talked about our vocations. We have talked about our call to be shepherds. But ultimately, it all boils down to that beautiful message contained in the second reading: “*See what love the Father has given us, in calling us his children: and that is what we are!*” This is our first and most fundamental vocation. From that recognition flows everything else: “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” So as we pray for vocations today, let us ask Jesus, the Son, to strengthen within us the conviction that we are God’s beloved: his sons and daughters. Let us ask Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to continue to call forth “shepherds after his own heart”: men and women whose lives of service and dedication – as bishops, priests, or deacons; as consecrated women and men; in various forms of lay ministry – inspire each of us to live out the call to service in which we **all** share, as disciples of Jesus, as apostles who have been sent.

***Pope Francis' PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS - 2015***

***LORD OF THE HARVEST,***

***BLESS*** young people with the gift of courage  
to respond to your call.  
***Open their hearts to great ideals, to great things.***

***INSPIRE*** all of your disciples to mutual love and giving—  
for vocations blossom in the good soil of faithful people.

***INSTILL*** those in religious life, parish ministries,  
and families with the confidence and grace  
to invite others to embrace  
the bold and noble path of a life consecrated to you.

***UNITE*** us to Jesus through prayer and sacrament,  
so that we may cooperate with you in building your reign  
of mercy and truth, of justice and peace. Amen.

***— Pope Francis***