

Points to Help Homily Preparation from a JPIC Perspective

May 3, 2009 Fourth Sunday of Easter

Focusing on the Gospel: John 10:11-18

Key words and phrases: A hired man has no concerns; he sees a wolf coming and runs away; I'm a good shepherd; I know mine; I will lay down my life for the sheep.

Today's Gospel paints a picture of Jesus as a good shepherd who knows his sheep and cares deeply for their well-being, even to the point of laying down his life for them. We as Christians are part of Jesus' flock. But we're also God's children called to grow in the likeness of Christ. This means that we ourselves are to become like shepherds who care deeply about the well-being of the world. The Second Vatican Council speaks of it beautifully: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

Recognizing that God's grace and judgment extends to the entire world, we may want to pose a question: "How do we as followers of Christ become more caring shepherds in the global village?" The sheepfold entrusted to our care is not just a parish community, but ultimately, the world community. And to what extent do we seek to know our sheep and the multifaceted reality that shapes their lives? All too often this reality is marked by unjust policies, hunger, exclusion, and various forms of violence. The writings and the preaching of Benedict XVI reveal his dedication to knowing his flock and understanding and dealing with the forces that impact their lives. For example, three years ago, in his 2006 Lenten Message he spoke of the scandal of underdevelopment in these terms:

It is quite impossible to separate the response to people's material and social needs from the fulfillment of the profound desires of their hearts. This has to be emphasized all the more in today's rapidly changing world, in which our responsibility towards the poor emerges with ever greater clarity and urgency. My venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, accurately described the scandal of underdevelopment as an outrage against humanity. In this sense, in the encyclical "Populorum Progressio," he denounced "the lack of material necessities for those who are without the minimum essential for life, the moral deficiencies of those who are mutilated by selfishness" and "oppressive social structures, whether due to the abuses of ownership or to the abuses of power, to the exploitation of workers or to unjust transactions."

It is all too easy for us – as friars or lay people – to run away from larger than life wolves of oppressive social structures, disrespect for human life, and destruction of the environment that terrorize and wreaks havoc on hundreds of millions of people. Sometimes, like a hired man who leaves the sheep and runs away, we as Christians may be tempted to do the same. Our Franciscan Tradition is also at our disposal to help us to be good shepherds and to grow the bonds of solidarity with the flock of the global village.

Jesus' love for his flock was heroic to the point of laying down his life. As his follower, we are also called to be courageous and self-giving, though it can take more than one form. Pope Benedict XVI reiterates this Gospel challenge when he says that, "Believers are called to open their arms and their hearts to every person, from whatever nation they come... (they) must open their hearts especially to the lowly and the poor, in whom Christ himself is present in a singular way" (Address to Assembly of Council for Migrants, 2006).

A wholehearted commitment to preach or put into practice the Church's social doctrine can also be a form of laying down one's life for the global flock. In January of this year, at the celebration of the World Peace Day, the Pope challenged all the faithful to "creative solidarity, not only by 'giving from one's surplus,' but above all by 'a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies.'" Considering the scope and depth of the Pope Benedict XVI's challenge, isn't this a call to heroism? How much effort do we, friars put into preparing our parish flocks to hear and respond to this call?

In a particular way, the Christian laity, formed at the school of the Eucharist, are called to assume their specific political and social responsibilities. To do so, they need to be adequately prepared through practical education in charity and justice. To this end, the Synod considered it necessary for Dioceses and Christian communities to teach and promote the Church's social doctrine. (Sacramentum Caritatis, 9)

What a wonderful opportunity it is for us to preach the Gospel in the context of the Church's social doctrine, and be like the Good Shepherd who cares deeply about the flock of the global village entrusted to us by God.

Possible prayers of the faithful that go along with the above JPIC Gospel themes:
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- We pray for our Holy Father Benedict XVI, the bishops, that the rest of our Church community, that through our solidarity and concern for the well-being of the global community, we may follow the example of Christ as the good shepherd. **We pray to the Lord.**
- We pray for men, women and children who are without the minimum essential for life, for those who are suffering from physical violence, exploitation and oppressive social structures.
- We pray for all the believers, that we may open our arms and hearts to people of different cultures, languages and faiths. For a just and comprehensive immigration reform that reflects the Church's concern for justice, the dignity of the human person, and wellbeing of family.
- We pray that people of good will would not run away from the magnitude and complexities of the social, environmental and cultural issues by face them with faith and courage.
- For ourselves, that we may help to challenge one another to live heroic and holy lives are hallmarked by charity, justice and solidarity with all God's creation.

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