

FROM FR. MARK

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In the Gospel Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who knows us, loves us, walks with us, and guides us along the way. The Shepherd is with us in good times and bad, in times of harmony and joy and in times of confusion, sadness, and grief. This is one of those times in our wider community here in the City of Baltimore that our need for the Good Shepherd's love is more evident than usual. Let us pray that the love and care which the Lord shows to each of us may be reflected in the statements and decisions of community leaders and in the words and actions of those who demonstrate.

This Sunday we also turn to the Good Shepherd in prayer for vocations. For over fifty years, the Church has also celebrated this Sunday as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. And this is to remind us how earnestly we need to pray for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life especially from our own community, our parish, and our own families. All of us have a role to play in fostering priestly vocations.

In the Gospel, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep. He lays down His life for them and is raised up again. All of us are called to entrust our lives to the Good Shepherd – to entrust to him our cares and worries, to allow him to lead us back when we stray; and to allow him to teach us how to serve one another, just as He cares for us. By Baptism, all of us are called to holiness and service in the life of the Church – or to use the language of Pope Francis, we're all called to be missionary disciples... followers of Christ, members of the flock, who bear witness to Christ's love in our lives.

And among the Lord's disciples some are called to serve the Church as priests. They are called to be living, sacramental images of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who devote the whole of their lives to the service of God's People. Pope Francis' famously said that priests are supposed to "smell like the sheep," that is, to be with their people, to closely identify with them in the trials of life, to accompany them every step of the way on their journey of faith. I can tell you from my own life that those called to be shepherds must themselves listen attentively to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Only in this way can we preach the Word, manifest the holiness of the Sacraments, and guide the Church in bearing united witness to Christ's truth and love.

What, then, do we know Christ is calling us and what does it require of us to hear his call and to answer it? Pope Francis tells us that anyone who is called to priesthood or consecration must make their own personal exodus... they must be ready to leave their comfort zone, their plans, their wants and needs, and to go forth from all those things to follow where Christ the Good Shepherd leads. It is an outward-bound journey that leads us deeply into God's love so that we can be placed by him in service to others.

These are the Pope's own words: "The exodus experience [stands as a symbol] of the Christian life, particularly in the case of those who have embraced a vocation of special dedication to the Gospel. This calls for a constantly renewed attitude of conversion and transformation, an incessant moving forward, a passage from death to life, like that celebrated in every liturgy, an experience of Passover." And lest we think we can achieve this on our own, the Holy Father goes on to say: "...vocation is always a work of God. He leads us beyond our initial situation, frees us from every enslavement, breaks down our habits and our indifference, and brings us to the joy of communion with Him and with our brothers and sisters. Responding to God's call, [he says] means allowing Him to help us leave ourselves and our false security behind, and to strike out on the path which leads to Jesus Christ, the origin and destiny of our life and our happiness."

So I ask everyone please to pray for religious vocations, that many more young men and women will answer God's call. We should also pray for those who are already in seminaries and religious houses of formation at this time, that they will persevere in accepting God's call.

A PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS TO THE PRIESTHOOD
Diocese of Belleville, Illinois

Leader: God is good.

Response: All the time!

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Response: God is good!

Let us Pray:

Lord, Our God

**we know that You are Goodness itself,
for you have given us your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ
to be our Savior.**

**Through Christ you have given us the Church,
and in the Catholic Church you have given us the Life of Grace
through Baptism.**

**Throughout history you have called forth ministers of Word and Sacrament
to lead, guide, and serve your people as priests.**

**We join with our Bishop in praying
for an increase in vocations to the priesthood in our Diocese.**

**We ask you, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
to stir up in the hearts of teenagers, college students, and adult men in our parishes
a desire to serve your Church in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.**

**Help them to hear and respond generously
to your quiet call deep within their hearts
to join with those who through the centuries
have built up your Church, the Body of Christ,
through the celebration of the Sacraments.**

**O God of Love and Mercy,
we pray that you will inspire our dedicated priests to continue
to share the joy and the happiness of their ministry at Your Altar
and in the Christian community.**

**Prompt parents, grandparents, and teachers to realize that
sometimes you call future priests to your service by a word of encouragement
from those who see in them the faith and talents of a good priest.**

We pray especially for our seminarians.

**We ask you to help them to be
the best human beings,
the best Christians,
and the best priests they can be.**

**Graciously hear our prayer through the intercession of Mary,
the Mother of priests, and in the Name of Jesus who is Christ the Lord. AMEN**