

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter we focus on the theme of the Good Shepherd or in Latin *Bonus Pastor*. Christ is the true shepherd and we the faithful are his flock. We belong to the Lord by virtue of our baptism when we became God's children with his divine life (grace) in our souls. This notion of shepherd and sheep may seem archaic in our post modern world but it was very common in biblical times or agrarian societies. Such terms remind us of how we relate to God. For example, a shepherd knows each member of his flock and Christ loves us as individuals. Does he not know our voice and calls us by our name? Moreover, a good shepherd does three things for his flock: he feeds them, protects them and heals them. Daily God feeds our souls by providing us with actual graces. Normally we are also daily fed with the bread of life in holy communion. God also protects us from unseen harm (evil spirits) and hostile predators on the internet and in the media. Lastly a good shepherd also heals us from injuries. We harm ourselves when we sin and weaken his prevailing grace in our hearts and souls.

Apart from these themes, the Lord also warns us of those wolves who appear as shepherds and seek to devour the sheep. Within the Church, since apostolic times there have always been bad shepherds or apostate bishops who seek their will instead of God's. We recall St Athanasius who in the fourth century suffered much from heretical prelates in defense of the Creed which we recite every Sunday. Athanasius was a deacon at the Council of Nicea in 325 when this profession of faith was formulated in opposition to the Arian heresy that denied the divinity of Christ. The false teaching was devised by a bad shepherd, a Catholic priest called Arius from Egypt, who in 336 just prior to being received by the Emperor in Constantinople died in a public lavatory. Such was his tragic demise. As the Archbishop of Alexandria for 45 years, Athanasius spent 17 years in exile being banished by heretical opponents on five separate occasions. Yet each time this good shepherd would return in earnest to feed with true teaching his flock and defend them from erroneous beliefs.

In recent times we too have witnessed the rise and fall of nefarious shepherds who purport fidelity to Christ while misleading many. The Lord only founded one Church which during its long and fascinating history has held 21 ecumenical councils, of which the last, being a pastoral council, 1962-65 was entitled the Second Vatican Council (the first being 1869-1870). In those three years, four key Constitutions were issued and one was on the nature and role of the Church (21 Nov 1964) called *Lumen Gentium*. Sadly, most people have never read these documents of the Council (16) and too many supposed shepherds deny what was taught by them preferring instead their own misguided and deluded opinions. Two matters of concern that surfaced after the Council but not because of the Council were the nature of the Church and appropriate devotion to Our Lady.

Let's look at the latter first. In the seventies it was common in the unprecedented push for ecumenism, all the churches be one, that Marian devotion be downplayed if not extinguished. To further this agenda, some cited the Council asserting that since it did not have a particular document dedicated to Mary, the Church thought less of her now. In fact, the exact opposite is true. For the Council chose to include its treatise on the Mother of God in its constitution on the Church. Indeed, all of chapter eight, the longest of all its chapters (17 paragraphs in all), was dedicated to Our Lady. Moreover, it was the longest treatise on Mary, Mother of the Church, that any council had ever written. Furthermore, Saint Paul VI, to offset these critics, wolves in clerical array, dedicated a papal encyclical on devotions to Mary in 1974. Then, we had, of course, in 1978, a renowned Marian Pope, Saint John Paul.

The second error still resounds today. Some theologians claimed that the Council changed the Church's internal structure for a more congregational lay model. So this issue concerns the hierarchy of the Church. The word is Greek and refers to the sacred structure or arrangement of the Church. Christ instituted his Church complete with holy orders, a sacrament of service, whereby some are called from the royal priesthood to the ministerial priesthood to convey the sacraments to God's people. Thus, deacon, priest and bishop the three fold hierarchy of Orders, including the pope, as universal head of the Church, with the Petrine office bearing the charism of infallibility, has always been distinctive of Christ's Church. This was not changed at Vatican II but re-affirmed most emphatically in this same constitution on the Church. In fact, a whole chapter (ch.3) is entitled Hierarchy of the Church, the second longest section of this document, before a shorter chapter on the laity. Once again, we note lies and deception in the name of a council but not by the council. So be warned of any such wolves in our midst. Seek only those shepherds who are faithful to the Church for they, in turn, are loyal to the Good Shepherd whose distinctive protection and care will provide all that your soul desires.