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Fourth Sunday of Easter – Holy Orders “Good Shepherd Sunday”

“My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (Jn 10:27). These are the opening words of our Gospel reading today. Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel includes words of Jesus comparing himself to a shepherd. For this reason, many call this “Good Shepherd Sunday.” In the Diocese of Rome, the ordination of priests always takes place on this weekend as well, drawing an explicit connection between Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

This is an important starting place for any discussion of this important sacrament. It can be all too easy to look at the role of the bishop, priest, and deacon as that of a mere functionary. We may start to think that they carry out certain jobs which could just as easily be done by someone else. But it is detrimental to the entire Church to look at Holy Orders in this way.

That is why all bishops, priests, and deacons must always look to Christ, the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14). The Good Shepherd knows his own, and his own know him. But most importantly, Jesus has that title because *he knows who he is*. He is the beloved Son of God, chosen and sent into the world to reveal God to man and man to himself. This identity is essential for Jesus to carry out his mission. It is why he is able to die on the cross for each of us. Because of this identity, Jesus is unconstrained by death; he rises again! This is the great event of our salvation which we celebrate in this joyful season.

Before we continue examining this sacrament, it is important to clarify a very important point: all Christians are united in the common priesthood of the Baptized. The Book of Revelation – which the Church often reads during Easter – says this right from the outset: “Jesus Christ...has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever. Amen” (Rev 1:5-6). By virtue of our baptism, all Christians share in this priestly call. The Church is a priestly people, which means we are willing to offer ourselves, to sacrifice on behalf of others for the greater glory of God. Fundamentally, we exercise our priesthood by participation in the liturgical life of the Church, especially Sunday Mass. That is the pinnacle of our lives as Christians, because it is the way we worship God. That is why all Christians can rightly be called “*alter Christus*” - another Christ.

But if Christians are called to act in the person of Christ before the world, who will act in the person of Christ the head in relation to the body, the Church? The role of the bishop, and his co-workers, the priests, is to act **in the person of Christ, head and spouse**. That is why the bishops and priests lead the liturgical celebrations of the Church – not because of any skill they possess which others do not – but because Jesus Christ has chosen them by virtue of a sacramental action to represent himself to his bride, the Church.

Deacons have the unique role of acting in the person of Christ the servant. Their call is slightly different from that of the priest and deacon, but his ministry is so closely associated with theirs that he receives the same sacrament. That’s right: within the one sacrament of Holy

Orders, there are three degrees: deacon, priest, and bishop. One cannot be ordained a priest unless he has first been ordained a deacon. And only one who is a priest can be ordained a bishop. This constitutes the hierarchical structure of the Church. It is not an accident of history or a convenient choice. The Church does not give itself these positions; rather, it is Christ himself who chooses to structure the Church. He sends laborers into the vineyard. This is a humbling reality for me every day, as I know it is for the other priests and deacons who minister in your parish.

Next month, four men will be ordained to the priesthood here in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. There are about sixty men preparing for priesthood at Saint Charles Seminary, along with another sixty or so preparing to be permanent deacons. We at this parish can offer them our prayers and support, especially by encouraging other young people we know to consider a vocation. I can attest that it is a great life! So as this Season of Easter continues, ask the Lord to send more good shepherds into our Archdiocese of Philadelphia, shepherds with hearts like Christ (cf. Jer 3:15). ~Rev. Eric J. Banecker