

## The Sheep and the Shepherd

I don't think anyone would claim that the Church is a democracy – it isn't; however it isn't a dictatorship either. Because the Church isn't of the world, though it exists in the world, it doesn't really fit the definitions of any of our established governmental systems. It is part monarchical, part parliamentary, even part federal – if such a combination is possible. If there is an appropriate adjective, it is probably “pastoral” – the Church is pastoral in the sense of my dictionary definition: *designating the relationship between religious truth and spiritual needs or clerical duties, also pertaining to a pastor or his duties.* Somewhere in there is a balance point based on a “constitution” of Church teaching in turn based on tradition, scripture, and the commandments of God, and overarching everything is the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

The word “pastoral” – *pertaining to a pastor or his duties* – is a popular image in both the Old and New Testaments and one that was no doubt easily understood by the people of the time, especially those for whom being herdsmen was a way of life. In our own day and age, it isn't such a familiar image, especially for people living in towns and cities. While we certainly have sheep farmers, I'm not sure just how many actual traditional shepherds there are anymore. And while the scriptural image of a shepherd might be helpful for the “shepherds”- the pastors - of the Church, the people of the Church may not always appreciate being likened in scripture to sheep!

Both images – the shepherd and the flock he or she tends – are used very powerfully in the Old Testament book of and what God says to the spiritual leaders of his time through the prophet was quite a challenge and remains so for the pastors, the bishops and priests, of the Church today.

“Trouble for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves (when they) ought to feed their flock. You have failed to make the weak strong. You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost. For lack of a shepherd they have scattered far. My flock is straying this way and that...no one bothers about them and no one looks for them. Well then, shepherds, hear the word of God. I am going to call the shepherds to account. I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view...as a shepherd keeps all his flock in view when he stands up in the middle of his scattered sheep. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong. I shall be a true shepherd to them.” [from Ez 34 v 1-16]

There was also a warning from God for the people. “As for you, my sheep... I will judge between sheep and sheep. Not content to graze in good pastures, you trample down the rest; not content to drink clear water, you muddy the rest with your feet. And my sheep must graze on what your feet have trampled, drink

what your feet have muddied.” [from Ez 34 v 17-22] God’s call was to fidelity and unity within the flock of his chosen people.

**I** was reflecting on all of this following my efforts last Sunday to explain the Church’s position on receiving communion under both kinds and to gently invite those who currently receive only the host to consider (unless they have an intolerance to alcohol or the taste of wine) celebrate the sacrament in its fullest physical form by also receiving from the chalice. However, with possibly one or two exceptions, come communion time the same people walked straight past the chalice without receiving and therefore apparently ignored everything I had said.

**I**t was suggested to me after Mass that one of the reasons people won’t receive from the chalice is because it is being ministered by a lay person – just as there are still those who will change lines coming up for communion in order to receive from the priest rather than the lay minister who is assisting him. This is very sad on a number of levels.

**I**t is now at least thirty years since lay ministers began to assist at communion and it has therefore long since become the norm. It is perhaps a little more recently that they have been required to be officially commissioned to their ministry, but this has made little difference to the rejection they experience from their fellow laity – their brothers and sisters in Christ - and that is a particularly sad situation. They have been commissioned to their ministry by the bishop with the same authority – that of the Holy Spirit - by which he ordains his priests to their ministry. To deny the commissioning that lay ministers have received is to deny the authority of the bishop and, therefore, the work and authority of the Holy Spirit.

**C**onsider also for a moment, how many sick and housebound – especially in large or busy parishes - would be unable to receive communion as frequently as they do if the priest was the only one making those calls. Lay ministry is invaluable in that regard...and it’s not because a priest isn’t able to do it, but precisely because lay ministers *can*. Would those who continue to deny their ministry, deny the sick and housebound communion too?

**W**e receive holy communion at Our Lord’s invitation, and the reality is that whether it is a priest, deacon, or a lay minister distributing the sacrament, they are acting *in persona Christi* – in the person (and place) of Christ. It is Jesus who is inviting you to “receive my body”, “receive my blood”, and swapping lines, or walking past the chalice, to avoid receiving from a lay minister ought to be a source of some concern to you because of what that action is saying. Occasionally a sick or housebound person will refuse to allow a lay minister to bring them holy communion, but they need to consider that it is Jesus they are

turning away regardless of who the minister is - how can they do that? And does Church teaching on the subject continue to be ignored?

**R**eturning to what God said to the spiritual leaders of his people through the prophet Ezekiel, priests, as the ordained spiritual leaders of the Church today, have a very obvious responsibility and duty to lead and teach according to the mind of God's Church. If we priests sit back and do nothing and say nothing, then we are as guilty of neglect as those leaders in Ezekiel's day. Every year at the Chrism Mass we stand before God and our bishop and renew the commitments we made at our ordination, one of which was and is: *Are you resolved to imitate Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd of the Church, by teaching the Christian faith without thinking of your own profit, solely for the well-being of the people you were sent to serve?*

**P**eople may not always like a particular priest as an individual but they should at least respect his office as priest and teacher. He has been appointed by his bishop acting with the authority handed down from the apostles, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit he then carries out his ministry as priest and teacher. In this regard I often return to the challenging words of Pope St Gregory the Great: "A religious leader should be careful in deciding when to remain silent and be sure to say something useful when deciding to speak. Ill-advised silence can leave people in their error, when they could have been shown where they were wrong. Negligent religious leaders are often afraid to speak and say what needs to be said – for fear of losing favour with people." The much more serious risk the priest takes in not leading and teaching, is of losing favour with God.

**J**ust as God's warning through Ezekiel was for "shepherds" – spiritual leaders - and their flocks, so Pope St Gregory's words have implications for the people as well as for priests.

**W**e all love stories and are entertained by them. For the most part, however, they are simply that: stories. They don't involve us and they are not about us. On the other hand when we read or listen to scripture "stories", they are very much about us because they are part of our salvation history, the history of our relationship with God, and the events we read about and the lessons that they teach are as relevant to us today as they were to the people at the time. We therefore can't afford to read or listen to scripture passively - God's word in scripture applies to us and is for us to hear and respond to. We can't afford to sit in judgment of the errors and sins of God's people in past ages because, human nature being what it is, we are probably making those same mistakes and committing those same sins. The only difference is our potential for doing better as a result of Our Lord's redemption of our human nature. However,

even having said that, we still need to hear - and learn from - the word of God proclaimed in scripture.

**W**e should never want to find ourselves as obstinate and headstrong (though we might admit to the possibility!) as the Israelites in their wanderings in the wilderness. It always amazes me that God was so obviously with them, leading them, feeding them, defending them, working miracle after miracle for them to see, and yet time after time they were unfaithful to their covenant with him, to the point that on more than one occasion God might almost have despaired of them. “God said to Moses, ‘I can see how stiff-necked these people are! Leave me, now, my wrath shall blaze out against them...but Moses pleaded with God.” [Ex 32 v 9-11] And just recently in our Sunday readings we had the gospel account [Mk 6 v 1-6] of Jesus going to his home town where he might have expected to be readily accepted because they knew him, whereas in fact they rejected him for that very reason. We are told that he was amazed at their lack of faith and that he could work no miracles there as a result – not because of his inability but their lack of receptivity.

**W**hen a priest teaches, and it is Church teaching and not his personal thoughts or reflections (though hopefully they are not without merit also), it is understandably a cause for concern when that teaching is ignored. It seems to have become the way of things in our society for people to challenge authority, but that can’t spill over into our relationship with God and the Church he founded. I am not for a moment advocating blind obedience – it is quite a healthy process to positively question and mull over what we are taught or told. But such positive questioning aided, if necessary, by seeking further guidance, is very different to challenging (or ignoring) what we have been told just because we haven’t heard it before or, God forbid, because we have never done things that way before.

**W**e personally don’t have all the answers and, as people of faith, we don’t *need* all the answers. The Holy Spirit is alive and active in the Church and it is very much part of our faith response that we are willing to trust his guidance and direction. This comes to us through the teaching of the Church, which in turn is made known to us through the bishops, successors of the apostles, and the priests and deacons ordained by them to share in their sacred ministry. Returning to the image of the sheep and the shepherd, we know Christ will search us out if we stray, but surely it is better that we don’t stray in the first place and the best way to achieve that is to stay close to the flock and to listen to - and be guided by - the voice of the Shepherd.

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