

Homily - 4th Sunday of Easter C

We are called to be in communion with God through Christ our Lord. Jesus describes his faithful followers as “Sheep”. What was Jesus trying to communicate to us here? The sheep, admittedly, is a very obedient and docile animal. A herd of sheep shows no signs of individualism. They are very social and love to live in community, and often grazing together. They are largely very accommodating of each other. We can say that their maxim is “together we stand, divided we fall”. The Church is to act as an entity always in one accord not in disagreement. Is this not why Jesus appointed only one leader, Peter, and required the other apostles to work with him, never against him? For as Jesus says, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls” (Luke 11:17, RSV).

The above is very important at this time of enormous social, political and legal challenges against the Church for the sins of an insignificant percentage of her priests. It is a period, not for playing the “Pharisee” (the ‘holier than thou’). It is a period we come together, rectify an anomaly and move forward with faith, hope and love. The Pharisee prayed to himself thinking he was praying to God: “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). He was only blind to his own sins, no more, no less. I was surprised when even a priest who should know better was attacking the pope suggesting he should resign. What a show of self-righteousness!

Yes, some of our priests have failed Christ and his Church. Child abuse is a heinous crime. Admittedly, many mistakes have been made in the handling. But, who among us is beyond mistakes? Let us not forget the injunction of Scripture, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1). This is what some bishops applied; little did they really understand the complexity of the problem. Let us never forget the words of Christ, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). This problem is not peculiar to the Catholic Church; it has nothing to do with celibacy. It happens in schools, hospitals, organizations, churches of different denominations, and even in families.

Accordingly, beloved in Christ, this is rather a time to remember what it means to be the body of Christ. As St. Paul illustrated in his discourse on the Church as the body of Christ, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice to-

gether” (1Cor. 12:26). We are enjoined to “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Jesus came and lived among us; and he, who is sinless, did not display the “holier than thou” mentality. Remember how he said to the woman caught in the act of adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again” (John 8:11). This is the way Jesus directed his sheep to follow him, to follow his own definitive example.

Today, therefore, Jesus makes it clear in our Gospel passage (John 10:27-30) that “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.... No one can take them out of my hand... and no one can take them out of the Father's hand.” The problem is that the way some of the issues are portrayed by the media have an adverse influence. Some Christians have fallen away from the faith. Beloved, we should remember that the mere fact that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus did not imply that the Church ceased to exist. Some people look for every opportunity to destroy the Church whether from within or from without. We see such tendency in the First Reading (Acts 13:14, 43-52). Paul and Barnabas were making progress with the Gospel. However “When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said.... [They even] incited the women of prominence who were worshipers and the leading men of the city, stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory. What a lesson! Let no one use you to destroy the very Church of Christ founded on the rock, Peter. One may find oneself contending against God. Jesus has declared, “the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Finally, the challenges we face today were predicted by Jesus beforehand. As we see in the Second Reading (Rev 7:9, 14b-17), the Church in heaven is that “great multitude... from every nation, race, people, and tongue.” The members constitute “the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” This implies that they had experienced many upheavals in this life. Yet, the sheep that belongs to Jesus will continue to listen to him and follow him in his Church until the end (Matt. 10:22; Mark 13:13).