4th Sunday in Easter 2024

Last Sunday, in a beautiful and uplifting liturgy, Bishop Alan McGuckian was formally installed as Bishop of Down and Connor. Some days earlier, the Bishop had spoken to his priests about the love in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a love which desires to renew the love in their hearts – and in the hearts of all the people of our Diocese. This is a theme we encounter in another form in today’s Gospel passage – *“Jesus said, ‘the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep”*. Both “heart” and “shepherd” are symbols of the Lord’s love for us. Because of the reference to *“the Good Shepherd”* this Sunday each year, is traditionally called “Good Shepherd Sunday”, when we are asked to think of, and pray for, those who have the particular role of “shepherd” in the community – that is our priests.

For various reasons, the subject of priesthood is a frequent topic of conversation today. All of us, for example, are concerned that we have fewer priests, and those we have, are generally in the older age group; we have endured, and continue to endure, the terrible scandal of the abuse crisis; then there are also questions about the continuing restriction of ordination to men. However, leaving aside those issues for the present, important though they are, perhaps a key question is, “What is the calling of the priest?”

The answer is surprisingly simple: a priest, by a life of faith and service, is called to reassure people that life makes sense, that there is a God who loves them, and that, in the end, all will be well. Everything that a priest does comes back to that. *(cf Basil Hume, Light in the Lord, p59).* Pope Benedict once said, “The profound truth of our existence is thus contained in this surprising mystery: .......(that) every human being, is the fruit of God's thought and an act of God's love, a love that is boundless, faithful and everlasting.”It is “the discovery of this reality”, the beauty of God's faithful love, which it is the inspiration for all who rejoice in the name “Christian”; for some it is also the incentive to respond to the call to priesthood - that the truth of this beauty might be “proclaimed ever anew.” *(cf Pope Benedict XV1: 49th World Day for Vocations.)*

An additional response to the question “What is the calling of the priest?” is that of *“shepherd”* or pastor. The model is Jesus himself who says, *“I am the Good Shepherd”*. The condition for being a shepherd is found in that exchange between Jesus and Peter: *“'Simon, son of John....do you love me?' And Peter said, 'Yes, Lord, you know everything: you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'”* (John 21:15-17). Responding to the call of priesthood requires that same heartfelt *“yes”* that Peter gave to Jesus when asked, *“Do you love me?”* It is as though Jesus says to the one who would be a priest: *“Give me your heart.”* God's desire for his priests was expressed by the prophet Jeremiah: *“I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jer.3:15).*

We only give our hearts to that which is beautiful, for example, to beautiful music or art. The one to whom I give my heart to is the one I see as beautiful – a beautiful person possess an instant appeal, catches and holds our attention. *(cf Jesus: A portrait, Gerald Collins S.J., p.1).* The Gospels make clear that what fascinated people about Jesus was the beauty of his personality and character. That had an extraordinary impact on them, and while this continues to be true today for every Christian man and woman, it must be especially true for the priest, and be his constant inspiration.

Priesthood is not defined by the number of tasks undertaken; nor is it breadth of scholarship, or ability as an administrator, or practised cheerfulness, which makes the priest a good pastor. A traditional prayer asks, "make my heart like unto thine" - the good pastor is one whose heart belongs to Christ, the Good Shepherd, and Christ describes himself as, *“one who lays down his life for his sheep”.* This same sentiment is personally and solemnly expressed each time the priest repeats the words of consecration in the Mass: “This is my body, this is my blood”, that is, my person, my life, which I give up with and in Christ for you.

With such a heart, and by faithfully proclaiming the Gospel, day-in-day-out, by celebrating the sacraments with reverence, and by attentively attending to parish pastoral needs, a priest can enable others to see that life does make sense, that there is a God who loves them, and that, in the end, all will be well. This is the real joy and the beauty of the priesthood, indeed, only this vision of priesthood makes it a purposeful and challenging way of life.

*“Lord,*

*you laid down your life for us;*

*may we, priests and people,*

*listen to your voice,*

*and live enthralled by your example*.*”* **Amen.**