- Reflections for a Time of Pandemic –

Forth Sunday of Easter

\* Do We Let Christ Love Us? \*

A basic belief of our faith is the indescribable experience of being loved personally by the Risen Jesus.

As long as we are experiencing this, we can live through any crisis or difficulty that life throws at us. Millions have even been martyred over the past two thousand years, sustained by this love.

‘Christ’ and ‘love’ are often spoken of in the same breath. However, to really ‘know’ – rather than just ‘know about’ – the personal love of the Risen Jesus for us, we have actually to be experiencing it.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus uses two images to help us appreciate his love:

* The first is the image of a shepherd, an image used by prophets when teaching about God’s love for Israel
* The second is the gate to the sheep fold or sheep pen.

***The work of a shepherd***

In Jesus’ time, a shepherd looked after a small flock of sheep. He spent the day with them, watching over them, leading them to good pastures, tending their wounds from thorns and brambles and defending them against predators.

A shepherd knew each sheep in the flock like a pet – and each sheep knew the shepherd. At night, a shepherd and his flock would join other shepherds and their flocks in a walled sheep fold or pen, where all could rest safely. There would be a large gathering of sheep from different flocks.

In the morning, each shepherd would call his sheep who would then separate from the other sheep and follow him out of the sheep fold.

This is what Jesus is referring to in today’s Gospel when he taught [[1]](#footnote-1)

… the sheep know his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out … and the sheep follow because they know his voice.

The image of a shepherd was used before the time of Jesus as an image of the God who loved the descendants of Abraham.

***The ‘gate’***

Then Jesus speaks of himself as the ‘gate’ through which both shepherds and flocks enter the sheep fold. Here he is alluding to the Church whom both shepherds and flocks can only enter through himself.

The shepherds are those the Risen Jesus has called to minister to the flocks or communities of the baptised. These shepherds were signs of Jesus’ love for his followers.

These shepherds can minister to their flocks only because the Risen Jesus – the gate – has admitted them to fulfil this role.

This is why, traditionally, we reflect upon the love of the Risen Jesus, who describes himself as ‘the Good Shepherd’, for each person who belongs to a parish or another faith community within his Church. [[2]](#footnote-2) We reflect too upon those he calls to be signs of his love – our priests – on the Fourth Sunday of Easter each year.

***The role of a priest***

Over recent years, we have all learned of a small percentage of priests who betrayed their calling from the Lord by abusing the young. It is important, therefore, for us to remember also what exactly is the calling of a priest, lest this be lost in our disgust.

In essence, a priest is called by the Risen Jesus to serve as his instrument as he, the Shepherd, loves and cares for all of us – members of his flock – through the ministry of the priest.

To understand how a priest is called to live this service, we need to recall how Jesus served his followers in the gospels.

***Jesus cares especially for those who share in his mission***

The first thing we need to remember when thinking of our priests is that Jesus commissioned his followers to proclaim his Gospel to the world [[3]](#footnote-3)

Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptise them … and teach them to observe everything I have commanded you.

In the gospels we read of Jesus loving those he sent out on mission. For example, when the apostles returned after being sent by Jesus to call people to conversion, [[4]](#footnote-4) he told them [[5]](#footnote-5)

Come away yourselves on your own to some lonely place to rest for a while.

This reminds us that we as baptised believers share in Jesus’ mission to teach others about him and his Gospel by our own words and behaviour. It reminds us too that Jesus knows how challenging this can be and seeks to love us by his care.

The second thing that we need to remember is that Jesus instituted the ordained priesthood during the Last Supper when he instituted the Eucharist. He empowers his Apostles to repeat this action when he told them [[6]](#footnote-6)

… do this in remembrance of me ….

Jesus empowered them after first washing the feet of Peter and the Apostles – an expression of selfless love, but also the gesture which recalled Moses washing the feet of Aaron and his sons as part of their consecration as priests of the Old Testament. [[7]](#footnote-7) In this way, Jesus created a priestly context.

Today, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus ordains or empowers priests to celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments. He does this through the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

The ordained priesthood is a calling, therefore, to *minister in the Person of the Risen Jesus, the Head of the Church.* For example, while it is the priest who says the words of Institution over bread and wine – ‘This is my body’, ‘This is my blood’ – it is Jesus himself with the Holy Spirit, who actually changes the bread and wine into his Body and Blood.

The ordained ministry is a calling, therefore, to strive to love and serve selflessly, like a slave who washes others’ feet. A slave has no rights; cannot argue back; cannot make demands on the master.

This is a difficult ideal, for no one – including priests – is free of human frailties and weaknesses. But the ordained ministry is the calling to strive daily to live this ideal.

Third, Jesus said that he came, not for the self satisfied who think themselves good enough without God’s help, but sinners. [[8]](#footnote-8) For this reason, it is their personal struggles to love through *slave – like* service in the face of their weaknesses which helps priests to understand the challenges of those in their pastoral care to live the Gospel. For, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us [[9]](#footnote-9)

… he too is subject to weaknesses

***The spiritual gifts or charisms of the ordained***

No priest has the personality or all the gifts needed to fulfil his ministry. Some can be shy; others can lack confidence in speaking; some may feel inadequate for some reason or other, while others again may feel uncomfortable when some priestly responsibility. No one likes challenges which take them outside their ‘comfort zone’.

Some may be gifted as administrators, but find relating with people hard. As St Paul once explained [[10]](#footnote-10)

God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise: God chose the weak … to shame the strong.

In other words, Christ calls a variety of personalities so that it is clear that the good priests do is through his power, not theirs. Their variety also means that people in their lives are likely to find at least one priest with whom they can relate easily in their life-time.

*The Sacrament of Holy Orders*

Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, priests, like bishops and deacons, receive spiritual gifts or charisms needed for their ministry. It is through these that the Risen Jesus reaches those priests serve.

*The ritual*

Priests receive these charisms as the Bishop lays his hands over their heads and prays the Prayer of Consecration. This is how the charisms of ordained ministers have been received since the time of the Apostles.

*The need to develop the charisms*

Like any gifts, those received through the Sacrament of Orders need to be developed. As St Paul wrote to Timothy, whom St Paul had ordained [[11]](#footnote-11)

This is why I am reminding you now to fan into a flame the gift of God that you possess though the laying on of my hands.

As a priest draws on the charisms he has received, especially by praying for help to fulfil responsibilities he finds difficult, that Christ gradually empowers him through the Holy Spirit in his areas of weakness. For example, if shyness makes home visitation or staying to talk to people after Mass difficult, the priest can rise above this through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit through the charism he has received through ordination for building Christian community.

It is by developing the charisms of his priesthood that a priest finds fulfilment. No priest can ever be happy if he remains in his comfort zone.

***Christ loves us by offering guidance for our lives through the ministry of priests***

The gospels highlight the commitment of Jesus to forming those he was sending out on mission. Examples include him

* explaining to them the Parable of the Sower [[12]](#footnote-12)
* emphasising the need in pastoral work to prioritise those who had drifted from the flock [[13]](#footnote-13)
* teaching how to respond to someone who has caused some harm [[14]](#footnote-14)
* revealing the power of his Resurrection for their lives, and the need to open themselves to it by accepting life’s crosses, especially those which result from trying to live as Jesus taught [[15]](#footnote-15)
* stressing that Christian leadership can only be through service. [[16]](#footnote-16)

Jesus loves us by teaching us today through the Spirit. As we reflect prayerfully on how his teachings relate to our daily lives, the Spirit stirs thoughts and insights which deepen our understanding and strengthen our faith.

*The ministry of priests*

Among other ways, for this to happen, Jesus seeks to teach us through the ministry of priests as they try to help us *relate the Gospel to our daily lives*. Ways they do so include

* homilies
* sacramental preparation
* spiritual conversation
* conversation with the sick and the frail as they talk about concerns when the priest visits them
* giving talks on the Christian message in classrooms and adult faith education settings.

The effectiveness of a priest in his teaching of the Gospel as an instrument of Christ depends upon his personal conversion.

***Christ loves us by deepening our relationship with himself through the ministry of priests***

Jesus shares and nurtures his divine life in us through various ways, the most important of which are the sacraments. As believers grow in holiness, they draw closer to the Risen Christ. In the Gospels, we read of him

* commanding his followers to baptise those who wanted to convert to become his disciples [[17]](#footnote-17)
* promising the coming of the Holy Spirit, a promise fulfilled at first at Pentecost, and then through Confirmation ever since [[18]](#footnote-18)
* instituting the Eucharist [[19]](#footnote-19)
* empowering the Apostles to forgive sin [[20]](#footnote-20)
* sending them to anoint the sick [[21]](#footnote-21)
* empowering the Apostles to serve as the ordained priesthood [[22]](#footnote-22)
* empowering married couples to live the Sacrament of Marriage with the power of his Resurrection. [[23]](#footnote-23)

Jesus also prayed for all people, including those who followed him.

*The ministry of priests*

Priests act in the Person of the Risen Jesus whenever they celebrate sacraments. They serve as his instruments for it is he who, through the Holy Spirit, changes bread and wine into his Body and Blood, forgives sin or strengthens the sick.

Unlike all other activities of priestly ministry, the sacraments always bring about their effects in believer’s lives, regardless of the degree of conversion or the worthiness of priests. As believers grow in holiness, their personal relationships with Christ deepen, as does their growth in their experiences of Christ’s love.

***Jesus forms Christian community through the ministry of priests***

Jesus began his ministry by forming his Christian community. Its numbers grew over time. No one could deepen in personal relationship with him on their own: they had to join others who were seeking his love through deeper relationship also.

Jesus also built up his community by loving all equally, without favourites. This is the celibate charism – to love all without favourites.

*The ministry of priests*

Jesus forms parishes and other religious communities today through the Christian community building efforts of priests. Like the Good Shepherd, priests

* seek to know and be known by their parishioners [[24]](#footnote-24)
* give their lives by working to serve the needs of those in their pastoral care [[25]](#footnote-25)
* seek out especially those who have drifted away from the community. [[26]](#footnote-26)

Like Jesus, priests normally are called also to love all without favourites or celibate love. As a result, priests do not marry. Nor do they show favour to some more than others. They are the pastors of young and old, well and sick, the able bodies and the disabled – and those born in Australia and those born overseas.

Like his teaching charism, the strength of a priest’s charism to build Christian community depends upon his degree of conversion. This is needed to serve as an instrument of the Risen Jesus.

The only charism which does not depend upon his conversion is that which empowers him to celebrate the sacraments.

***Conclusion: Conversation with Christ of our priests***

Let us pause now to thank Jesus for calling our priests as shepherds through whom he seeks to love us, his flock. And let us pray always for our priests.

Let us spend a few moments praying for faith in the ordained ministry, so that we can be open always to Christ as he seeks to love and to help us through our priests.

**Bishop Gerard Holohan**

1 May 2020

1. John 10:3, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 10:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 28:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark 6:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mark 6:31 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 22:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John 13:5-8; Exodus 40:12, 30-32; Leviticus 8:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mark 2:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hebrews 5:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1 Corinthians 1:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 2 Timothy 1:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mark 13:36-43 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Matthew 18:10-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Matthew 18:15-18 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mark 8:31, 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Matthew 20:26-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Matthew 28:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Luke 24:49; Acts 2:1-8; 19:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. John 20:19-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mark 6:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Luke 22: 19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mark 9:331; 10:1-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. John 10:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John 10:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Matthew 18:12-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)