

“...do you love me?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, there was an infamous prisoner-of-war camp in North Vietnam called, Hoa Loa, which the American soldiers simply called, the Hanoi Hilton.

On Christmas Eve, 1971, the Vietnamese camp-commander handed out a few Bibles to the American prisoners, as a kind of Christmas present. He informed them that the books would be collected at midnight on Christmas night.

To use the time wisely, the American soldiers made pens out of wire and ink out of brick dust & water. They used toilet tissue as writing paper, upon which they copied key passages for worship services.

Among the passages they copied was the parable of the lost sheep, in which Jesus compares his Father to a shepherd, who seeks out a lost sheep. Naturally, the prisoners thought of themselves as that lost sheep.

They also copied Psalm 23, in which the psalmist says of God:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.... Even though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil; for you are at my side.”

The prisoners saw themselves as sheep walking through deep darkness. **BUT**...they weren't afraid because they knew God was with them.

I don't think the soldiers could have found a better theme with which to identify. From the earliest times, Jews pictured God as their shepherd. In time, the title 'shepherd' was also given to the religious leaders of Israel, for they were God's representatives on earth.

Unfortunately, some of those representatives did not prove worthy of their calling. Shaking his boney finger at the unworthy shepherds, Ezekiel says:

“Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who have been pasturing themselves! Should not shepherds pasture the sheep? You did not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. You did not...seek the lost.... Because you...‘butt’ the weak sheep with your horns, until you have driven them out, I will save my sheep, so that they may no longer be despoiled. I will appoint one shepherd over them, my servant, David; he shall pasture them & be their shepherd.”

Ez.34:2-4, 21-23

It's against this backdrop that we must read Our Lord's beautiful words in John's Gospel:

“I am the good shepherd and I know mine and mine know me.... I will lay down my life for my sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These I will also lead and they will hear my voice and there will be one flock, one shepherd.” Jn. 10:14-16

In other words, Jesus says he is the shepherd promised by God through the Old Testament prophets.

And this brings me to the Gospel I just read to you from St. John, wherein Jesus commissions Peter to succeed him as Shepherd of the flock. The great moment occurs when Jesus says to Peter:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

To which Peter says, **“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”** And Jesus says, **“Feed my lambs.”**

“He then said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him a third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

And a third time Peter said, **“Yes.”**

And a third time Jesus said, **“Feed my sheep.”**

By this three-fold command, **“Feed my sheep,”** Jesus commissions Peter to succeed him as the shepherd of the flock. He appoints Peter to be the leader of the others!

Finally, years later, there came another great moment in the development of the shepherd-theme.

‘When & where was another great moment in the development of the shepherd-theme?’ you ask. Well, I’m glad you asked that question!

It was when Peter addressed the heads, or bishops, of the local churches by the title of **Shepherd**. He delegated to them a portion of his awesome role as Shepherd. He said to them:

“Be Shepherds of the flock that God gave you. Do your work from a real desire to serve.” 1 Pt.5:2

And that brings us to the present-day titles or labels. We give the name ‘pastor’ to the priest in charge of our parish. The word, pastor, comes from the Latin word for shepherd.

Pastors are shepherds, sharing in the authority of Peter and the bishops, who received their commission from Jesus, who received his commission from the Father.

It’s the pastor’s awesome role, along with his vicar or deacon (if he has such) and other leaders in the Church, to be a living representative of the Father among us.

Sometimes we hear people comment: **“One Church is as good as the next”** or **“They’re all the same”** or **“They all praise the same God. So, what’s the difference?”** Herein is a place where the Catholic Church separates itself from our Protestant brothers and sisters. We are **NOT** the same! The Catholic Church, **ALONE**, has ‘Direct Apostolic Succession’ or ‘Direct Apostolic Lineage.’ This makes it (the Church) much closer to what Jesus originally established –particularly with our Sacraments and the Mass...it’s a direct link to Our Lord, at the Last Supper, when he Instituted Holy Orders & Eucharist.

Thus, the shepherd-theme in today’s Gospel does three things:

1st, it helps us appreciate how beautifully the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together.

2nd, it shows us how the Father shared his role as Shepherd with Jesus, who shared it with Peter, who shared it with lesser Church leaders, giving us Direct Apostolic Succession/Lineage!

3rd, it reminds us of the awesome role all Church leaders have:

they are the Father’s representatives among us.

I now close with this prayer for Church leaders:

**“Lord... We ask you to bless the leaders of your Church in a special way. Help us see through their failures to what they are meant to be:
Living signs of your presence among us.
Above all, help us to work with them and through them
for the spread of your kingdom throughout the world,
especially here, in our corner of the vineyard!”**

May Almighty God, our Abba, bless you, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.