

Sunday Eastertide4-B5 homily by Fr. Gabor

This is Good Shepherd Sunday, a time to reflect on the ministry of priests. The teaching and example of Jesus and St. Paul are the best tools for this.

In his letter to the Colossians (1:28) Saint Paul spoke of his ministry as one of “warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” He doesn’t focus on moral perfection in those whom he serves, but on helping them to grow and mature spiritually. In this process he relates to people as a father, and as such he doesn’t mind at all if he has to toil and struggle for them (see Colossians 1:29). He is no different from any parents who desire not just to comfort and care for their children, but to feed them and see them grow and mature mentally and spiritually. This is exactly the way I look at my ministry as a priest: I often think of my title: as ‘Father’. This title means to me that I am supposed to be an image of the heavenly Father, so that whoever sees me sees the heavenly Father. The more I am like that the more I am like Jesus, because remember what Jesus said to people that the one who sees Him sees the Father (cf. John 12:45 and 14:9). It would not be “good” for a parent to come home and find his 25-year-old son, in his right mind, sitting on the couch sucking his thumb. In the same way a priest as a Father wants always to help parishioners to grow and mature in thinking and in faith. Fr. Malloney, a Scottish born Canadian priest, wrote in his book, called *Divine Renovation: ‘A church that makes missionary disciples has at its very heart a desire and capacity to bring people from immaturity to maturity (Amazon ebook location 1126).*’ Our Church’s faith formation and other programmes are offered to help everyone towards greater spiritual maturity. For growth we need food and even more importantly a Good Shepherd who knows what the best food is and where to find it.

In the Church “pastoral care” usually refers to care given to the sick, dying or grieving. This is and remains an important pastoral action of the Church, but in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, the primary task of the shepherd was to lead the people to spiritual food and drink: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters” (Psalm 23), to feed the sheep so they can grow and mature. Ezekiel the great

prophet of the Old Testament speaks against the false Shepherds of Israel for their many failings, chief among them that they “do not feed the sheep” (Ezekiel 34:3). A Good Shepherd must also look for the lost, because he loves each one equally, but His primary task is to feed the sheep, so they can be brought to strength and maturity.

Apart from faith formation programmes, such as RCIA, retreats and courses, it is also important for maturity and strength that the Good Shepherd helps His people to identify and recognise their special talents and gifts.

In Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we read these words: ‘The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come ... to maturity...’ (Eph 4:11-13). We find similar lists in the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:4-11) and in the 1st letter of St. Peter (1 Pet 4:10-11). These passages speak of the different gifts and charisms that God gives to Church members and to the Church as a whole. Saint Paul explicitly tells us that these charisms exist “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Thus, the primary task of the pastor is not to do all the work of ministry himself, but to help parishioners identify these charisms and use them to serve the church. This is why we have the charism discovery programme for you every year.

By using your specific gifts in the church and with the church you live out your common priestly ministry. It is normal that we love to do and we are enthusiastic for what we are good at. This is actually how you know what way God wants to work through you.

If all ministry within the parish would be done by the priest and a few people, two things would happen: I would burn out very quickly, but more importantly, very little pastoral care would take place. So let’s help each other to know our gifts by giving positive feedback about things that we do well. It doesn’t require a lot of efforts and in fact it also brings people closer to one another and the Church family gradually grows and matures, and the Good Shepherd can joyfully see that his efforts were not in vain; his efforts produced good results.