

Easter 4  
5.11.25

Several of the candidates who seemed to be front runners in the recent papal election made sense – a Vatican Secretary of State, the former head of the Congregation that oversees the Church's liturgy, an intellect and diplomat from Bologna, and a Filipino who is charismatic and dedicated to promoting the dignity of all people especially the poor.

I told folks that I was hoping the next pope would be the retired Cardinal from Toronto, Tom Collins. If he won, I would have saluted him with his namesake drink. I heard someone say that they were hoping Cardinal Pizzaballa would be elected. They also hoped that he would choose the name, John. That way we could have referred to him as Papa John Pizzaballa.

Few if any of us predicted that a Cardinal who was born in Chicago and worked most of his life in Peru would be the next pope. But the Holy Spirit and the College of Cardinals had other ideas. Cardinal Robert Prevost will now and forever be remembered as Pope Leo XIV.

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. That name comes from the theme which is contained in the gospel we just heard proclaimed. On this Sunday we think of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. As his sheep, we are called to listen to his voice. That voice guides us while we are on this earth. And the voice of the Good Shepherd leads us to the glory of his Kingdom.

While Jesus is the Good Shepherd, today's theme reminds us that we are guided by other shepherds in the Church. The pope, in particular, is a representative on earth of the Good Shepherd. The pope is often referred to as the Vicar of Christ – literally, the representative or deputy of Christ. Pope Leo XIV is that for us. He doesn't take the place of Christ. Rather, he is the window through which we see Christ. He is the window through which the breath of the Holy Spirit flows - refreshing, renewing, and even challenging the Church.

When the new pope was named and we learned he hailed from North America, I received several texts that simply read "USA, USA, USA." I was quick to respond that while we can be proud that a brother from the United States was elected pope, he is the pope for all people and all nations.

That was abundantly clear to me when he gave his address from the balcony of St. Peter's after being named pope. Pope Leo XIV first spoke Italian. He did so to acknowledge the people of the Church where he would be living. It was a most important gesture of respect. Next, Pope Leo XIV spoke in Spanish. He did so as a nod to the people of the culture he served for so many years. I believe he also did that because he was acknowledging the language of those who make up the majority of the Catholic Church throughout the world. His omission of speaking English was not a snub to English speaking Catholics or a snub to his nation of origin. Rather, he was sending a message that he was the pope for all people. (By the way, we did speak in English to those who gathered at his first Mass on Friday.)

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave us this new pope to lead all the people to the Father and to his Kingdom. Our faith tells us that he is the right person for our Church in this day and during these times.

It will not be long before this pope, this new shepherd, disappoints some of his sheep. Pope Leo XIV is gifted with a tremendous intellect. But there are times when he will speak in simple terms so that all will understand. He will work to make the faith accessible to all, when some might want him to elevate the faith to lofty theological statements alone.

Leo XIV chose to wear some of the traditional papal regalia that other popes have worn and popes like Francis eschewed. Some have seen in that a sign that Pope Leo XIV will emphasize more traditional teachings and practices. While reemphasizing some of the traditions of the Church, this pope will also break the mold and introduce new approaches to the faith which are bound to disappoint some.

Even the name this pope chose – Leo – is a nod to Pope Leo XIII. Leo XIII wrote one of the most impactful and profound encyclicals in recent history. In 1891 he published ***Rerum Novarum*** – a declaration which has influenced to this day how we are to work, how we are to be paid for that work, how workers have basic and inalienable rights, and the purpose of work. While those themes are relevant and good to talk about, there will be those who may be disappointed when Pope Leo XIV speaks out for social justice when he criticizes the extremes of capitalism which leave some on the economic sidelines, and when he calls for acceptance of those who seem to be on the

fringes or beyond the bounds of Catholicism by how they live. By doing that, Pope Leo XIV will reflect Christ who dined with sinners, associated with prostitutes, stood up to the religious authorities who wanted to stone the adulterous woman, and rubbed shoulders with gentiles and Samaritans.

This papacy and those papacies we have experienced in our lifetime show us the face of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. I, for one, feel so blessed to have lived and grown old in an era when different popes have found diverse ways to communicate and live out the gospel with courage, selflessness, deep faith, and in the face of opposition – from those who think these popes have not been Catholic enough or from those who have tried to silence them by violent means. I am not giving into hyperbole but, as Catholics, we have been living in an incredible age where Christ has been made manifest in the lives of our popes.

Throughout the Season of Easter, our first reading comes from the *Acts of the Apostles*. That reading traces the growth of the Church from its infancy in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. That story and that growth was not without controversy or hardship. In today's passage from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, we hear Paul and Barnabas preaching to gentiles and Jews who had converted from gentile practices. These people were outsiders. Many felt they were not really Jewish enough or were only semi-Jewish. But Paul and Barnabas ministered to them, preached to them, and treated them with dignity, because they understood that these people like all life-long, ethnic Jews were the chosen race - holy, good, and righteous in the eyes of God. Because of their dedicated service Paul and Barnabas were threatened. The religious authorities intended to harm them. Nevertheless, these

two persevered. Their perseverance is a sign of Christ's presence in them and in the message they preached.

Popes are called to do the same. They preach truth to power. They preach the value and dignity of all. They preach that there is only one kingdom, the Kingdom of God. And they preach that there is only one way to live – following not the laws of the influential or affluent alone, but to follow the poor and humble Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

To paraphrase the conclusion of today's gospel, when we listen to and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, we will not perish. The Good Shepherd will protect us and cover us with his hand.

Pope Leo XIV is that visible reminder of the Good Shepherd in our midst. In the months or weeks ahead, or maybe in just a few days, the pope will say or do something that is bound to disappoint us. But the job of the pope is to preach the gospel and build bridges which lead to the Kingdom of God. Such teaching and such bridgebuilding is bound to be difficult and hard to hear at times. But that road, as we remain faithful to the path and the voice of the Good Shepherd, will lead to eternal life.

Let us pray for this pope. We can be proud that he hails from our nation. But we should be even prouder that he seeks to unite all people from all lands and from every way of life as Christ did while he walked this earth.

Amen? Amen!