



FR. DANIEL'S CORNER

THE SHEEP OF HIS FLOCK

In April 2017, Harriet Constable, a London based multi-media journalist published a documentary on the BBC about sheep. "Sheep are one of the most unfairly stereotyped animals on the planet," she began. "Almost everything we believe about them is wrong." We generally assume that sheep are "stupid, defenseless, harmless creatures that mope about on hillsides doing not very much. They are good for two things: being eaten and producing wool." But the reality, Harriet stated, is that "sheep are surprisingly intelligent, with impressive memory and recognition skills. They build friendships, stick up for one another in fights, and feel sad when their friends are sent to the slaughter. They are also one of the most destructive creatures on the planet."

In the 1700s, Founding Father George Washington declared: "If the freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter." Washington's statement alludes to Isaiah 53:7-9 which describes the Suffering Servant of Yahweh as a sheep that is led to the slaughterhouse without complaining. Recently, a retired Yale and Harvard professor of English, William Deresiewicz, published a fascinating book titled "Excellent Sheep" where he warned that America's Ivy League Colleges are producing young people who are excellent zombies, good at conformism but lacking the habit of critical thinking.

Jesus refers to us as sheep in the most excellent way: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Three qualities are highlighted here which point to a certain level of intelligence: hearing, knowing, and following. The sheep hear the voice of the Master, they identify him, and they follow. They do not follow a shepherd or a hireling that they don't know. This means hearing and acting in an intelligent way - special qualities used in the Bible to define authentic discipleship. To hear and follow require careful discernment. Otherwise, the sheep will fall into wrong hands, or go astray and be devoured by wild beasts.

Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd who gives eternal life to the sheep. This is about his sacrificial and atoning death on the Cross through which the floodgates of eternal life have been thrown wide open to us. He has set the standard by which Christians should relate to one another. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (John 10:11). As the inspired Psalm of David lyrically put it, "The Lord is my Shepherd there is nothing I shall want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul" (Psalm 23:1-2). These words of sacred poetry are about a shepherd who cares for the sheep and feeds them with healthy food. The idea has its roots in the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel where Yahweh said about himself: "I myself will look after my sheep as a shepherd tends his flock. I will tend my sheep, seek out the lost, bring back the stray, bind up the wounded and heal the sick" (Ezekiel 34:11). In the Church, this Good Shepherd continues to tend us with healthy food through the ministry of priest, shepherds he has appointed in the name of His Son. They feed us with the living word of God and with the living Body of Christ - the Eucharist.

The task of shepherding also applies to all of us, not just priests. By virtue of our Baptism, God entrusts us with responsibilities that pertain to shepherds. All of us - parents, teachers, priests, religious, all who have care or custody of others - are called to exercise our responsibilities after the model and example of the Good Shepherd, with trust, affection, sacrifice, love, humility, and consideration for the sheep.

In an age of bad leaders and bad shepherds (and we have to admit that we sometimes have bad shepherds even in the Church), let us look up to Jesus our Good Shepherd, the author and finisher of our faith, for the example necessary to model our lives in imitation of Him.

Finally, we need to return to the first quality of the obedient sheep that Jesus pointed out in the Gospel: listening. In a world of cacophonous voices, which voice do we adhere to: the voice of Jesus or the voices of our secularized culture? Do we create opportunities to spend time with Jesus in daily prayer, in visits to the Blessed Sacrament and in the reception of the sacraments? Are we all alive to our responsibilities as shepherds at home and in our workplaces? May the Good Shepherd give us the grace to hunger more for His word than for any human food. Amen.