

## WEARING TWO HATS: MOTHER AND GOOD SHEPHERD

In hearing confessions during Holy Week there were any number of parishioners who came to confession and in the course of our being together mentioned their concern for their children who are not presently practicing the Catholic faith. Their question had to do with what happened, why is this going on and what can we do to return them to the practice of their Catholic faith. They asked me to preach about this. And so here I am.

A couple of things. Today is Mothers' Day, a very popular American Day for celebrating our mothers—living and deceased. In the liturgical year this Sunday is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Only occasionally do these two feasts fall on the same day. This year they do. I believe it is a perfect match. In many instances our mothers are the very first person who fill the role of the Good Shepherd for us in our faith lives. I do not say this in any way to denigrate the role of the father in the family also filling this role, as Good Shepherd for their children. I mention it simply to remind us that Jesus is not the only Good Shepherd. Jesus becomes the Good Shepherd and models for us what a Good Shepherd looks like. Then, it is our turn. We are each asked by Our Lord to become a Good Shepherd in our own individual lives.

In today's gospel from John, Jesus speaks: "My sheep hear my voice. No one can take them out of my hand." But I must say: the experience is precisely the opposite. The experience of so many Catholic mothers and fathers is that the powerful cultural mores do indeed speak a different voice to our children. This culture's voice speaks very persuasively a word which overthrows the message of Jesus of Nazareth. This culture does in deed take these sheep out of the Lord's hands. So what is going on?

I have prayed about this question, this kind of situation. "Lord what is happening?" Most recently in my journaling I received a word from Our Lord. "Yes, I have allowed the young to leave me for a time, go their own way for a time, like the father allowed the prodigal son to leave his home for a time. To use an image from gardening, I have allowed so many to be pruned, cut off from the stem—for a time—but not for ever. The pruning takes place so the growth of the plant may begin. At first it seems so severe that it is like a death. But then, slowly, the buds begin to appear and then the growth and the blossoming and finally there is the beautiful emergence of the full flowering."

The Lord went on: “I want you to build me a Chapel of Perpetual Adoration specifically for people to come in to pray for the return of their children to the practice of their faith. So that my faithful can come and spend time with me, adore me with the kiss of their lips, and pray for their children to return to me. The Sower has been sowing. There is to be a reaping. A harvest. All of your prayers I will use to draw the children to the Eucharist, to have families of their own and to bring their children too. It is time. The pruning is coming to an end. A pause. Then growth. Do whatever I ask. You are my faithful son. I am your loving Lord.”

What mothers and fathers have going for them is: 1) their love for their children and 2) their prayer for them and 3) their personal example. These will have their effect. What the children have going for them is 1) their love for their parents and 2) the Holy Spirit indwelling within them. We have an ally on the inside. We are to pray for the awakening of the Holy Spirit within them. The third thing in the children is unexpected. Remember the disciples walking away from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus that first Easter Sunday afternoon? How they had such high hopes rooted in their belief in Jesus. But all their hopes were dashed. They had heard reports of his resurrection but they didn't believe them and now they were walking away sad.

A stranger comes and walks with them. These young disciples are away from the community that does believe in the resurrection. They are not happy. Their dreams are gone. They feel a hopelessness. But as they walk with the stranger, something happens within them. They begin to get excited again. They have no idea that this stranger is actually the Lord. It is only when they all go into the inn and experience his hospitality where he blesses bread, breaks it and then shares it with them, that suddenly it all makes sense. Suddenly they do believe. Suddenly they realize that they too have encountered Jesus. He does live. He is alive. His Way has been vindicated. He has triumphed over sin and death. And what do they do? They rush back to rejoin those in the believing community who are still there. What were those believers doing there? Praying!

My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord. Yes, they do. Yes, they will. But we who have faith must pray for those whose faith is little—until it takes hold and begins to grow. Mothers do this. Fathers do this. Good Shepherds do this. Our young people rely on this.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.