

Shepherds Conformed to Christ

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*Homily given by Michael at his Mass of Thanksgiving.
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As often happens the readings appointed for the day coincide with a particular celebration. In this case doubly so, for we remember St. Lawrence and also give thanks for an ordination to the priesthood yesterday.

Shepherd imagery is widespread in the Scriptures. Many leaders, especially kings, are seen as shepherds. God is described as a shepherd in psalms 22 and 79 to name but two. Jesus himself comes as the Good Shepherd and through his life and death shows what God's shepherding of his people is really about.

Today's readings [Heb.13:15-17,20f; Mk.6:30-34] present the divine shepherd as the teacher who preaches the Word, as the provider who gives nourishment and the leader who gives guidance along the Way. Above all, the great shepherd has entered into a covenant with his sheep, ratified in his own blood.

Christ the Good Shepherd abides with his people. He continues to offer them wisdom, nourishment and a path to follow. This is our Good News. Presbyters and bishops continue to make present in a visible way Christ's own priestly ministry. By the three offices of teaching, leading and sanctifying, the priests of Christ serve the holy people of God so that those same people can be strengthened in their commitment to prayer and service and offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice.

Christ's sermon on the shepherd reminds priests in a provocative way that to be a true shepherd of the sheep a person must be first conformed to Christ. This conformity is not a slavish imitation but openness to God's will; it is a commitment that has receptivity to God's transforming love at its very centre. Only then can an individual give his or her life to the Church for the sake of God's people.

All this seems quite idealistic and indeed it is. All of us can readily call to mind the examples given by some priests who have proved stumbling blocks rather than shepherds. Often we run the risk of falling into the error of expecting priests to be perfect. Or if not perfect, then more advanced in the spiritual life than others in the Christian community. Even if we look beyond the Church to political life we must agree that we also expect high standards from our secular shepherds. We no doubt remember the sleaze stories that dominated the media not so many years ago, and more recently President Clinton's alleged escapades and the shadows hanging over Mr. Mandelson and Mr. Vaz. Let us call to mind that even great servants of God like David and Solomon were certainly not whiter than white. God's promise justified these people and not any merit of their own.

Providentially we have the example of St. Lawrence set before us this day. A monk and a bishop, he was successor to St. Augustine as archbishop of Canterbury at the turn of the seventh century. Lawrence's election and consecration by Augustine proved unpopular with Rome and caused problems because the Holy

See had not been duly consulted. After his rocky start, Lawrence continued to be beset with difficulties as he failed to reconcile the factions within the English Church - one with a Roman tradition, the other Celtic. Then, when a new king in Kent initiated a strong anti-Christian backlash, Lawrence gave serious thought to returning to his Italian monastery. Pious tradition says that he had a dream in which he was admonished by St. Peter who commanded him to stay. Lawrence heeded this and recommitted himself to his difficult work but died a short time later, his work left undone.

Lawrence remains in Augustine's shadow and seems a failure. Lawrence's example though teaches us the value of fidelity. The works of service in the Church may vary from person to person according to the gifts each one has received but the work remains God's. Faithfulness to God's will, after the pattern of Christ, is the universal call to all Christians. Success is not to be measured in human scales. All we are invited to do is share our gifts with one another by our good works and our mutual support. When so much of society operates out of a culture of blame, Christians more than ever need to point to Christ who offers reconciliation. God's response to human failure is divine love which offers new beginnings.

As the Good Shepherd offers himself to us as nourishment through the Word and the Eucharist, let us give thanks for his priesthood and commit ourselves to praying for our priests.