

**Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter - Cycle C
May 8, 2022**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

A priest on pilgrimage in the Holy Land described how he watched two shepherds talking together while their sheep milled around them in the valley beneath him. The sound of their voices carried up to him on the hillside. After a while the shepherds parted and went off in opposite directions, all the while keeping up a “kind of conversation” with the sheep. To the priest’s astonishment, the sheep separated from one another and sorted themselves out into two flocks, each one going after its own shepherd. It was a perfect illustration, the priest said, of sheep recognizing the voice of their shepherd and following him. We can only marvel at the instinct by which the sheep recognized the voice of their own shepherd and did not follow the other one. We see the same instinct at work among penguins, who in a crowd of thousands manage to find their own offspring.

Pope Francis once commented on what he called “the mystery of the voice.” He said, “The mystery of the voice is suggestive: we think about how from our mother’s womb we learn to recognize her voice and our father’s voice; from the tone of someone’s voice we can perceive love or scorn, affection or coldness.”

In today’s Gospel (Jn 10:27-30), Jesus observes how the “sheep that belong to me listen to my voice.” He is making a claim that we can verify. Every human being, young and old, good and bad, has a conscience. Conscience is, as St John Henry Newman taught, “the voice of God.” For Newman, conscience is a proof of God’s existence. “Every human being has a certain commanding dictate,” he said, “an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others.” If we want to know whether we should do a certain thing we only have to ask ourselves and our conscience will give us the answer. Often enough our conscience prods us before we ask it, warning us not to go down this way or that. More positively, it will lead us where we should go.

Furthermore, what our conscience tells us is confirmed in scripture. The scriptures are the revealed word of God. “The word of the Lord,” the reader proclaims at the end of each reading. There can never be a conflict

between what God tells us in our conscience and what God tells us in the scriptures. It is the same voice speaking in two different ways.

But there is what we might call a “false conscience” or an “erroneous conscience,” persuading us that our conscience is nonsense; that the scriptures are untrue; that our faith is unfounded; that we can do whatever we feel like doing. A man once told a priest that he thought God was telling him to leave his wife and marry another woman who was a more devout Catholic. The priest reminded him of the Sixth Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” What the man thought God was telling him could not have been from God, but was only his own fantasizing.

In this regard, as the national debate rages across our country in light of the malicious leak of the draft of a Supreme Court decision that will apparently overturn the disastrous 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, abortion activists and pro-abortion politicians are trying to convince themselves that abortion is not wrong. They are deluding themselves, since the Catholic Church has always condemned abortion as gravely sinful since the earliest times of Christianity. A well-formed conscience, on the other hand, recognizes that human life begins at conception. Modern technology shows us plainly through ultrasound imagery that a fetus is indeed a human baby.

Many voices speak to us today, very often through the media: experts, philosophers, scientists, and thinkers; good people of great wisdom and reason. They help form our views. Pope St John Paul II, a philosopher himself, never belittled human reason. He wrote: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth." But even the most intelligent people can be wrong: not all the opinions we hear are right, so we test them by faith. Saints recognize the inner voice of God with clarity because they habitually listen to it. They are not easily deceived or misled. They trust the teachings of the Church, meditate on the scriptures, and pray, listening to that small voice which comes into our mind.

Listening to the voice of conscience is also how we find our vocation in life. Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is known as Vocations Sunday or Good Shepherd Sunday, and is dedicated as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. The Church sets aside this day each year to fulfill Jesus' instruction to "Pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38; Lk 10:2). Traditionally, when speaking of vocations, the Church has concentrated its attention on vocations to the ordained ministries (priesthood and diaconate), consecrated life in all its forms (male and female

religious communities, societies of apostolic life, consecrated virginity), secular institutes in their diversity of services and membership, and to the missionary life. I believe it is also essential that we include God's call to the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony in our prayers and vocational efforts. Our culture no longer provides strong support for marriage and family life, and in some ways even disdains it, so we must teach young people not only the importance of marriage and family life, but also exhibit the happiness that comes from a life of selfless giving to care for one's spouse and children

It is very fitting that we observe Vocations Sunday on this Good Shepherd Sunday. The Latin word for shepherd is *pastor*, which is aptly applied to describe the role of a priest in caring for his flock of parishioners. But parents are also shepherds of the little flock of children that comprise their family. Just as a priest leads his parishioners to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, parents lead their children to God by teaching them about the faith not only in their words, but even more powerfully by their example of love, their devotion to daily prayer, and their weekly participation in Sunday Mass.

Today especially, on this Mothers' Day, we thank God for the gift of our mothers who brought us into this world. We pray for expecting mothers,

that they may welcome their baby with love, trusting in God's help and grace. Let us pray also for our mothers who have died, that God may reward them for their maternal love. May our Blessed Mother lead us all to her Son Jesus, the Good Shepherd, for as we proclaimed in our Responsorial Psalm today, "We are His people, the sheep of His flock."

In our second reading, from the Book of Revelation (Rev 7:9, 14b,-17), we heard that "the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

In the Gospel, Jesus says, "The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice... they will never be lost." The more we listen and obey what we hear (for we are free to ignore it), the more easily do we distinguish the voice of our shepherd from alien and mistaken voices or our own imagining. Pope Francis wrote, "When we learn to distinguish [Christ's voice] from others, he will lead us along the path of life, a path that stretches even beyond death."

May God give us this grace. Amen.