

Father O'Connor's Homily for 21 April 2024  
Fourth Sunday of Easter – B  
Good Shepherd Sunday  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Acts of the Apostles 4: 8-12

1 John 3: 1-2

John 10: 11-18

A retired priest tells this story on himself:

*When I was a full-time pastor, a word that means “a shepherd,” I thought that I was “a pretty good shepherd.” That is, until the day some friends and I went to a small restaurant. We were seated in a booth where, behind us in another booth, was a man who obviously had had too much to drink. He was very loud, vulgar and abrasive.*

*The waitress, who knew me, went over to this man and said, “Sir, do you know that a priest, Father Smith, is sitting in the next booth?”*

*The man got up, draped himself over the corner of our booth and shouted, “Father Smith! I’m so glad to meet you. I attended one of your Masses and heard you speak, and it changed my life!”*

*“The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep,” Jesus says in the Gospel. For that man, I would have made an exception.*

I would like to tell you a story about a priest who made, not “an irritated exception,” but “a graced inclusion” of a man that he did not even know. That stranger’s name was Franciszek Gajowniczek [FRAN-chee-shek] [guy-OHV-nee-chek]. Franciszek [or “Francis”] became a special witness to one of the great good-shepherd-heroes of the twentieth century.

Auschwitz Concentration Camp was a killing ground for Jews as well as a place for enemies and critics of the Nazi regime, including many Catholic priests. The Nazis treated their prisoners cruelly, saving their special hatred and punishment for priests.

After a prisoner had escaped, all the others were made to stand in the sun for days with their hands on their heads. After a second escape, ten prisoners were machine-gunned down. The third escape occurred in July 1941. This time the punishment was that one hundred prisoners from Franciszek’s barracks were forced to stand in rows of ten. And ten of these one hundred men, one from each row, would be selected to die. The camp commander then began his selection.

The sixth man chosen to die broke down sobbing: “My wife, my children! Who will take care of them?” Suddenly another prisoner from that same sixth row spoke up and said: “I am a Catholic priest. I will take the place of this man with the wife and children.” And everyone looked at him.

“You must be one of those vermin priests,” the commander snarled. And he accepted him as one of the ten. And then, this volunteer and the other nine were all locked in a bunker to starve to death. The Nazis were not going to waste any bullets on them.

That man who volunteered was indeed a priest. But he was not just any priest. He was the well-known Polish Franciscan, Father Maximilian Kolbe. He published religious newspapers and magazines, running the largest Catholic publishing house in Poland at that time. Naturally the Nazis regarded Father Kolbe with suspicion when they invaded Poland. And he was arrested on 17 February 1941.

Back to the incident. When the guards were out of earshot, the prisoners swapped information about the fate of those ten men, starving to death in the bunker. It turned out that Father Kolbe was leading the other men in prayers and hymns as they all faced their certain deaths.

After about two weeks, all the men had died, except for Father Kolbe. The Nazis, anxious to use the bunker to punish others, had a doctor inject poison into Father Kolbe to finish him off on 14 August 1941, the Vigil of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Father Kolbe, only 47 years old, laid down his life for the life of Franciszek Gajowniczek, a poor Polish soldier. Father Maximilian Kolbe was truly “a good shepherd” to him.

Franciszek was liberated by the Allies, after spending five years, five months, and nine days in Nazi prison camps. He was reunited with his wife, Helena. Although she survived the war, their two sons were killed before his release.

Franciszek was in the Vatican as a guest of Pope John Paul II when he canonized Saint Maximilian Kolbe on 10 October 1982.

Franciszek Gajowniczek died in Poland on 13 March 1995 at the age of 93, a little more than 53 years after having his life spared by Saint Maximilian Kolbe, who took his place.

A story of great heroism. “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep,” we hear Jesus say in today’s Gospel. I hope – and I trust that you will not

think me too self-serving – that with all the terrible scandals in the Church, where some priests have seriously harmed others by their sinful behavior and have shamed us all – and we can never apologize enough to their victims or do enough to heal their pain – that you will remember that there still are good shepherds in the Church today, lots of them.

There was Father Maximilian Kolbe. There are the many priests that we have known over the years. The faithful ones who baptized, heard the confessions, celebrated Mass, married and buried family members and friends. Those who have guided and encouraged us in our life's journeys. These and many others like them, here and throughout the world, who try to imitate the care of our Good Shepherd.

Good Shepherd Sunday is a graced time to pray for our good shepherds. On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, it is also a good time to pray for more vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate and the consecrated life, especially among our own young people who are discerning the question, "Lord, what are you calling me to do with my life?"

And it is a good time to realize, in this often messy family that we call the Church, that the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, continues to lead us and guide us still.

As Psalm 23, the Shepherd Psalm, says so beautifully:

Even though I walk in the dark valley  
I fear no evil; for you are at my side  
with your rod and your staff  
that give me courage.

My Shepherd is the Lord.  
Nothing indeed shall I want.