

Dear Friends,

The Church observes the World Day of Prayer for Vocations on the Fourth Sunday of Easter each year, also known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In his message of this day in 2022, Pope Francis said that when we speak about vocations, we are speaking about making God's dream come true. The Pope reminded religious and clergy that they are called to be protagonists of the Church's mission; to be guardians of one another and of creation; to welcome God's gaze; to respond to God's gaze; and to build a loving world. "As Christians, we do not only receive a vocation individually; we are also called together," the Pope said. "We are like the tiles of a mosaic. Each is lovely in itself, but only when they are put together do they form a picture; each of us shines like a star in the heart of God and in the firmament of the universe." At the same time, he reflected, "We are called to form constellations that can guide and light up the path of humanity, beginning with the places in which we live."

All four Gospel writers use the metaphor of Jesus as shepherd. John explains that the life and work of Jesus demonstrate God's love for everyone. Just as the sheep recognize the shepherd's voice, so we know the voice of Jesus when he calls us. This kind of love resembles the love the Father has for Jesus. It is a love that binds us at once to the Father, to Jesus and to each other. The gate guards against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep. Jesus emphasizes that sheep recognize the voice of the one who cares for them. They follow their shepherd and will not follow a stranger whose voice they do not know.

"Life" or "eternal life" in John's Gospel is not just about life after death. It is life that begins here and now; it is knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent. It is knowing the voice of the good shepherd who truly cares for us. It is life in community, finding security and nourishment as part of the flock. It is life that abounds in meaning and value, and endures even beyond death. For John, Jesus reveals the presence of God. The thief comes to kill and destroy, but Jesus comes to offer life in abundance.

We may reflect on those places in our Church where we still need "good shepherding" or where the "shepherding" has left us in need. Some issues cry out for our Church's response, like ending violence and militarism, protecting the natural world, and helping women and young people play fulfilling roles in the Church and in society. Today's image of the good shepherd also challenges us to apply the image of the wider world. Does not the image of the good shepherd challenge our international institutions to show a special care for those in need – those who are poor and powerless, migrants and refugees, vulnerable children and minorities? Does it not challenge our nation and its institutions to a more sincere respect for human rights? A world that makes real the loving care of the good shepherd must work to put an end to all kinds of abuse that God's people currently endure.

The Pope concluded his message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in 2022 with an appeal to the entire Church to work together, inspired by God's love. "Let us pray, brothers and sisters, that the People of God, amid the dramatic events of history, may increasingly respond to this call," the Pope said. "Let us implore the light of the Holy Spirit, so that all of us may find our proper place and give the very best of ourselves in this great divine plan."

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach