

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Easter (C)

11<sup>th</sup> May 2025

‘Vocations Sunday: a new Pontificate, a new Call’

Acts 13: *all were destined for eternal life became believers*    Ps 99: *we are His people, the sheep of His flock*    Apoc 7: *the Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd*    Jn 10: 27–30: *the sheep that belong to me listen to my voice.*

For most of you, the Conclave last week, and the exciting ceremonial, and drama, at the election of a new Pope, is the first one you will really remember, since you would mostly have been still quite young when Pope Francis was elected in March 2013. I can’t say that I have any strong memories of the election of Pope John Paul I — the first Conclave in my life — but I certainly remember my Dad coming and telling me when I woke up on that day in August 1978 that Pope Paul VI had died; I was 12. It is disconcerting to be without our Universal Shepherd, the Vicar of Christ, and it is always reassuring that the period *Sede Vacante* lasts just a brief 2 or 3 weeks. We thank the Lord that just 17 days after the death of Pope Francis we have our new Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, to unite and lead the Catholic Church in the name of Jesus Christ. We thank the Lord also for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit that he granted to the Cardinals locked in Conclave to choose the

one God wishes to be there for us in Rome, city of SS Peter & Paul, the visible focus and anchor of Christian unity.

It’s very appropriate that this first Sunday of Pope Leo’s pontificate is ‘Good Shepherd Sunday,’ when, as always on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we hear a portion of Jn 10, the chapter with Jesus’s self-description, “*I am the Good Shepherd.*” After long passages from Jn 20 and Jn 21 for the past 3 Sundays of Easter, detailing some of Our Lord’s post-Resurrection appearances, today we have just these few verses, Jn 10: 27–30. The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd, “*and we, the people who belong to His pasture, the flock that is led by His hand,*” is a very tender one, always appealing. Pictures of Jesus as the Good Shepherd with the lost sheep draped around His shoulders, whilst sometimes a bit saccharine, speak of a determined love and mercy for each of His flock including the wayward: “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no-one will snatch them out of My hand.*” Pope Leo has already spoken of his role as Shepherd, in his address to the Cardinals still gathered in Rome, yesterday,

He also spoke of his chosen name, Leo, which as many had guessed harks back to the 25-yr pontificate of Pope Leo XIII in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and who was groundbreaking in Catholic Social Teaching with his encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* on “Capital & Labour” in the light of the Industrial Revolution, especially regarding the rights of workers. Pope Leo XIII was forward-thinking; an inveterate peacemaker, reaching out to all sorts of nations and governments to improve Church–state relations; he promoted the Rosary widely; and he created John Henry Newman a Cardinal within just a year of becoming Pope. He was a most-beloved Shepherd, and Pope Leo XIV clearly wishes already to be cast in the same mould.

*Good Shepherd Sunday*, our Eastertide celebration of the Risen Jesus’s being our one and true Pastor, speaking with the one voice to follow that is infallibly life-giving, is also, and always, *Vocations Sunday*. It’s a day to pray for more shepherds to lead the flock of Christ to pastures new, to be taught and sanctified by the One Supreme Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The Lord ‘from the word

go’ was training the Apostles to take on the mantle of His shepherding, a role they took on immediately with courage and wisdom at Pentecost. And quickly new pastors were added to their number through the Apostolic Succession of bishops: so, for example, we see the dynamic missionary activity of SS Paul & Barnabas in the Acts 13 reading today, as they preach boldly, to Jews and to non-Jews, the Gospel of Jesus. In every age we need more vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Church is “ever ancient, ever new,” as we have just seen, as the papal baton is passed on without rancour or rupture from Pope to Pope, from Francis to Leo, continuing without intermission the mission demanded of us. And so, we cannot ever have a *laissez-faire* attitude to priestly and religious vocations; we cannot ever be satisfied with the *status quo*, as if the priests and religious of our day, or of our acquaintance, were enough, or would be there for ever. They won’t be! — and they need supplementing. Every single generation of young Catholics needs to take responsibility for the Church of the future, and of its need for Shepherds — for priests

and religious. A new Pontificate reminds us of this most forcefully, and joyfully: Christ never ceases to call to ministry those whom He has in His divine heart settled on to be His sacred collaborators in the shepherding of the flock. Ten years ago Pope Leo had only just been ordained a bishop for a diocese in Peru — little did he know that, thanks to Pope Francis's bringing him to Rome two years ago and creating him a cardinal, he'd be elected Pope, but the Lord is a "God of Surprises," and maybe He has surprises for us, too, if we open our hearts to total submission to His Will.

For some of you, without doubt, as devout believers in Christ and with such love for His Church already as young adults, this surprise could mean your giving your whole life to Him in the service of priestly or religious ministry. Do not ignore this possibility; do not dismiss this out-of-hand. Consider seriously, is this maybe what the Lord is calling me to? Examine your heart: where, as you consider your life ahead, post-university, is the Lord tending to lead you to see greatest peace? The Lord Jesus

Himself didn't try to evangelize the whole world alone; His saving death and glorious resurrection was sufficient grace for all humanity of all times, but getting that message out was something that He would be entrusting to other men and women — to the Church. Even in His earthly ministry He sent out the 72 to prepare His way in all the towns and villages He Himself was to visit; then as He rose and ascended, He gave the *Great Commission*: "*Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News*" (Mt 28) ... "*You did not choose Me, no I chose you, and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last*" (Jn 15). We cannot leave evangelization merely to the inspiration of the Spirit in the lives of others, except in the sense that we allow the Spirit to speak to them through us, and for some of us that will mean also our ministry as priests and religious. The Priesthood of Jesus Christ, and Religious orders of so many charisms and ministries, are a necessary part of the Church's make-up, willed by the divine architect of the Church: they are essential parts of its structure; we cannot do without them. And that means that

we must each prayerfully discern: might that be the life that the Lord calls me to? ... Might that be where I will find greatest happiness, in serving the author of all that is good, not just by my Christian faith, and not just by sacred union with a spouse in the raising of a family in faith, but in fact with that even greater gift of self to Jesus which has its sacrifices, but which brings its rewards?

You, university students, have so much to offer the Church not only here whilst at Newman House, by your presence, and prayer, and projects with one another, but most importantly into the future: you are the ones to build up the Church with marriages, families, children, ... with assistance in parishes as volunteers, catechists, organisers, fundraisers ... and crucially, with *vocations*: the priests and religious brothers and sisters come from you; they don't grow on trees for the plucking! You *are* the harvest that the Lord wants now, and then He wants to have you help in bringing in His next harvest; so please, pay it some attention and give it some prayer; ask yourself: *what does the Lord really want from me? What is my calling in the*

*Lord's great plan for the Church and the world? What part does He wish me to play? Does the Eternal Shepherd desire me also to be part of His shepherding, sanctifying, sacrificing? — in Priesthood or Religious Life? Only by carrying out that which His loving heart actually calls us to in our personal vocation can we be truly happy in this life; let's never forget that!*

Pope Leo, I must say, already looks and sounds the part, with an immense sense of joy about him. I would like to quote words from his first Mass as Pope, on Friday, which he celebrated in the Sistine Chapel, just 17hrs after the Cardinals of the Church had elected him Pope there. This is how he began his Petrine ministry — they were words addressed to the Cardinals, but they can engage us all, I think, and enfold us all in their *vocational embrace*:

“... as we celebrate this morning, I invite you to recognize the marvels that the Lord has done, the blessings that the Lord continues to pour out on all of us through the Ministry of Peter. You have called me to carry that cross, and to be blessed with that mission, and I know I can rely on each and every one of you to walk with me, as we continue as a Church, as a community of friends of Jesus, as believers to announce the Good News, to announce the Gospel.” (9<sup>th</sup> May 2025)