

Fr. Donato Homily – May 5, 2019

The crozier, or pastoral staff, carried by a bishop is meant to look like a shepherd's crook. Walking in mountains, a shepherd might need to catch his balance. He might need to beat a wolf. He might need to grasp a fallen sheep by the neck. That is, he uses his authority to serve by stabilizing, by rescuing, and by protecting. Bishops are the chief shepherds in their diocese, and while priests are tasked with teaching divine truths, sanctifying the people of God with the sacraments, bishops are also specifically tasked with governing, or shepherding the people of God.

In our very educated age, we might take exception with being called sheep, because we can think for ourselves, and yet, that is what Jesus calls us. After asking Peter three times if he loves him, one for each time he denied him, he is instructed to feed the sheep. Love and truth, these two things go together.

We are sheep because none of us knows everything. Most of us have not read the whole Bible. We do not know the early Church Fathers. We have not read encyclicals. We have opinions partially formed by the faith and the instinct known as the sense of the faithful, but we also are formed by our own age and the world. We can easily delude ourselves into justifying our sins, thinking only about our own cultural problems, and forgetting that we live in a global Church and a Church that has existed for two-thousand years and whose task is to preserve the memory of Jesus and his teachings.

A friend of mine whom I have spoken about before was sent as a missionary to Siberia, where he assisted the bishop in traveling around and confirming the thousands of Catholics who had not seen a Catholic priest in decades. One time he said he was confirming this woman who had been the village's go-to religious authority and taught all the kids the Catechism and prayers the best she could for decades. He began the profession of faith that we know so well, "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth?" Thinking this a test to show that she knew the faith, she pointed at a picture of the pope at that time, John Paul the II, and said, "Does he believe it?" My friend said, "Yes," and she replied, "Then I believe it." She did this for all three questions in the renewal of baptismal promises. She knew, as my friend says, that the Pope teaches out of love. Love and truth, these two things go together.

Each of the popes in my lifetime has faced particular challenges that he has spoken out against: John Paul about the dignity of the human person as it was degraded by both particular strands of capitalism and communism, Pope Benedict with the dictatorship of relativism, with false notions of ecumenism and Biblical studies, and Pope Francis with what he has called the new Pelagianism and the new Gnosticism. They have tried to stabilize the Church, to warn against these errors, and to correct those who promote them, to protect the faith. This is the role of the pope, to feed the sheep.

In our day and age, it seems silly to think popes are infallible at times because we see them saying all sorts of things on every airplane flight they take, and they offer their opinions on many things. This is not infallibility. It is when they intend to speak in a very official capacity, doing exactly what Jesus asked Peter to do, which is to teach out of love.

Let me say it again. Love and truth, these two things go together. Jesus put them together. If Jesus is the Truth, and Jesus is God, and God is Love, then Truth is Love. They go together. Some psychologists say that love is the most powerful healing force in the world, but only truth sets us free. Love without truth is a nice feeling. It is shallow because we know it is fake, that it does not reach to the depths. Truth without love is harsh, it is arrogant, it is aloof. Only when Peter had affirmed his love in Christ could he be trusted in feeding the sheep, in giving them the truth.

Today's readings invite us to give thanks for the gift of the papacy, that no matter who occupies it, whether John Paul or Benedict or Francis, we have a someone who teaches out of love.