

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**Year C, 2025**

Acts 13:14, 43-52  
Ps 100

Rev 7:9, 14-17  
Jn 10:27-30

*The good shepherd and the new pope*

Think of all the places and institutions that are proud to have a claim on our new Pope, Leo XIV: the United States, his home country; Peru, where he ministered for decades as a priest and a bishop and where he became a naturalized citizen; Chicago, the city where he grew up; New Orleans, where his momma and them are from; the Augustinian Order, to which he belonged and in which he ministered as a friar and a priest; the universities where he studied: Villanova, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, the Angelicum in Rome; the White Sox, of which he is now the most famous fan!

With each passing day, the world learns more about Robert Prevost, who is now Pope Leo XIV. And we Americans in particular can relate to him in so many ways: he is our fellow countryman; he speaks English; and with our accent! (And Spanish and Italian and some other languages, too.) His two older brothers have been all over the media, giving interviews, talking about their little brother, Rob, who is now pope. It's just wonderful and delightful.

My impressions of him are increasingly positive. He seems to have a natural dignity about him, an ease of manner and expression. He radiates a sense of calm and thoughtfulness, but he also seems approachable and comfortable in the company of others. His appearance on the loggia of St Peter's Basilica was appropriately

formal, as was fitting for the occasion, and yet there was nothing rigid or stuffy about him. And his choice of name, Leo, hearkening back to the last Pope Leo, the XIII, is remarkable and encouraging, at least for me, and for very many Catholics who are familiar with the life and legacy of the last Leo.

The last Leo was pope from 1878 to 1903 and the first pope to reckon with the modern world in its transition from monarchies to democratic republics, in its move from agrarian to industrial economies, in the shifting sands from a religious and spiritual worldview to a secular and scientific one. The last Pope Leo addressed the problems of socialism and critiqued the depredations of capitalism; he examined the proper role of the state and the duties of citizens; he expounded on rights and responsibilities of Christians as citizens and what that means for a rightly ordered democratic society; he defended the freedom of the Church as a part of society and reflected on the nature of human freedom and the origins of civil authority. Pope Leo XIII courageously, and by force of thoughtful argument and persuasion, addressed the most pressing political, economic, social, and religious concerns of his time. And he did, not as a politician or potentate or demagogue, but with the voice of a pastor, a shepherd, speaking the gospel message to the concerns and circumstances of his time.

If one hundred twenty years later, our Pope Leo is signaling, by the choice of his name, the worthy legacy and rich heritage of the last Pope Leo, then when our Pope Leo speaks to us and to the world on

the issues of the day, we had better be listening, for we will be hearing the voice of the good shepherd. And I find all this encouraging. I am glad. And hopeful. Now whether we heed the good shepherd's voice, well, that's another matter.

In the tenth chapter of St John's gospel – passages of which are always read on the fourth Sunday of Easter – Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, whose sheep know and heed his voice. He compares himself with “hired hands,” mercenary shepherds who work for pay and have no concern for the sheep, who are not theirs. The wolf comes, and the hirelings flees, leaving the sheep as easy prey for the wolf to catch and scatter. Jesus, by contrast, is the good shepherd, who will face the wolf and lay down his life for his sheep, so that they can be gathered together into one flock, to live in unity and peace.

It doesn't take much imagination to see how this image applies to every pastor, from your parish priest, to your bishop, to your pope. If a pastor, which is another word for shepherd, refuses to look out for wolves, what good is he? If all a pastor cares about is his pay, his comfort, his standing, the fine things he enjoys from his flock, their gifts and praise and accolades, then when these things are in danger he will protect them and not the flock. And if that means letting in wolves or running from them, that that's what he'll do. Shepherds do have a good life when the flock is at peace, when *together* they can enjoy the serenity of verdant pastures and still waters (Ps 23). But

when the flock is threatened, we need a shepherd who knows how to get up and face the wolf – a good shepherd.

Up until the modern era, the flock of Christ was troubled primarily by the wolves of heresy, which is false doctrine, wrong belief. Heretical voices, coming from princelings and priests alike, drew away many of the flock, and the true pastors, the good shepherds, had to work hard and energetically, convincing and challenging, persuading and encouraging, accompanying and teaching and guiding the sheep, especially the lost and wandering ones, to try to return them to the peace and unity of the one flock under the one shepherd (Jn 10:16).

With the modern era, heresy seems to have gradually given way to ideology. But in fact, the two are related phenomena, two sides, we might say, of the same coin. The wolves that nowadays threaten the peace and unity of the sheep who belong to Jesus, the good shepherd, are ideologies, all of them *-isms*. Call them as you like: secularism, commercialism, consumerism, socialism, capitalism, liberalism, conservatism, and all the rest. Ideologies, all of them. Wolves that threaten the flock of those who belong to Christ.

It's one thing for a good shepherd to face the wolf, to call it out by its name – whatever heresy or ideology, whatever *-ism* it is going by for the day. But it's another thing entirely – and a much harder and much more thankless task – to try to rescue the sheep who is running *toward* the wolf instead of *away from* it, who is keeping company with

the wolf instead of with the shepherd. When the sheep willfully go astray, when they prefer the wolf to their shepherd, when they are tricked into believing that their shepherd is evil and the wolf is good, now the good shepherd has a fight on his hand, because he's fighting not only the wolf, but also the sheep, beguiled and deceived by the wolf, taught anger and resentment by the wolf, blinded and deafened by the wolf, precisely so that the voice of the good shepherd will be unheard and unheeded.

Let's be honest for a moment: none of us (and I begin with myself) are so pure and perfect that we are immune from ideology. All of us are to some degree drawn into the orbit of one ideology or another, the ideology that for whatever reason appeals to us. And the more you think this doesn't apply to you, the more likely it is you're already deceived and deceiving yourself. Hearing the voice of the good shepherd means being willing to take a fearless intellectual, moral, and spiritual inventory of ourselves, to identify how our own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, prejudices, and behaviors have led us to reject the grace of conversion and the change that it demands. That kind of honesty, that deep, unflinching honesty with oneself, can be agonizing. And for that reason it is, sadly, rare.

When it comes to seriously examining *in the light of the gospel* our deeply, or conveniently, or just lazily held political, social, and economical... let's call them preferences or even prejudices, we have a tendency to become resistant, or defensive, or sometimes even defiant. We are prone to being dishonest even with ourselves about

our partial and half-hearted commitment to the gospel and to our rather full-throated and uncritical endorsement of ideas and ideologies that are far from being consonant our Christian commitments. Honesty, meaning truth, about these things is rare. But truth alone will set us free.

If the gospel, if the voice of the good shepherd, has never provoked you to struggle with the way you see the world, or others, or certain situations, then you haven't been listening well or paying attention. If the gospel, the voice of the good shepherd, has never forced you to wrestle with your social, economic, and political positions, affiliations, and commitments (or lack thereof)... Simply put, if you've never changed your mind or had a change of heart because of the gospel, then that means you've never experienced *metanoia*, you've never been set free by the truth, a truth that brings us to repentance, change, conversion, and finally reunion with God and with the children of God, the flock of Christ.

Sheep are simple, humble creatures, which for the most part, will follow their shepherd. But some sheep, as any shepherd will tell you, can be stubborn, rebellious even. And when they wander away, all proud and insolent, it is then that they are most vulnerable to the wolves, who are always on the prowl, always hungry, always ready to feed the straying sheep with the half-truths and whole lies of whatever *-ism* can best separate them from the shepherd, whose rod and staff can comfort them, who alone will lead them along right

paths and restore their souls and anoint their heads with oil and make their cups overflow.

So, little flock, do not listen to the voice of the wolves and their ideologies. To them, you are only a commodity, a means to an end, a thing to be bought and sold, a resource to be exploited, used, and then discarded. They do not know you! They do not love you! They have no real concern for you and, I promise you, they will certainly not lay down their lives for you. Instead, listen to the voice of the good shepherd, Jesus, and of those who stand in his stead – your pope, your bishop, your pastor – who love you and call you by name. The good shepherds will call out the wolves and rally you to safety, to the one Good Shepherd, Jesus, who alone can give you eternal life so that you may never perish.

So long live our Pope, Leo. May God grant our Holy Father the grace to be a good shepherd, faithful, fearless, and true. And may he always enjoy the esteem, love, and devotion of a flock faithful and true to Christ, whose hearts are attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Amen.