

4 Easter A SML 2017 (Good Shepherd Sunday) JN 10:1-10

Last Sunday, I took four boys from the parish for an afternoon at St. Charles Seminary in Philadelphia. As we drove the Schuylkill Expressway, off to the right was the Art Museum and we started talking about the papal Mass offered there this past September. One of the boys thought I said the “paintball” Mass rather than “papal” Mass, so we had a good laugh at his expense taking about a “paintball” Mass with the Holy Father. SPLAT! This past week, my mind wandered back to earlier “paintball,” excuse me, “papal” visits in particular, one offered by St. Pope John Paul II, and the following prose with which you may be familiar:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land, here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand, a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles . . . Cries she with silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these homeless, tempest-tossed to me" . . .

The date was October 5, 1995, the place was the Meadowlands, as our Holy Father, St. John Paul II so eloquently spoke of Lady Liberty, in whose shadow the Mass was offered, reminding us that our heritage was one of an immigrant Church, a people who were never strangers to hardships, enduring inhuman conditions in hopes for a life better than the one they left in the "old

country." A walk through Ellis Island would convince even the agnostic that what carried those immigrants was faith in a higher power; for the Christian immigrants, it was faith in Jesus Christ. **Our ancestors followed the voice of the Good Shepherd with a faith much larger than a mustard seed; with a faith that could move mountains.**

Our ancestors were an immigrant Church whose faith carried them through the trials of the industrial revolution and it was the Catholic Church through Pope Leo XIII who spoke so vehemently against those abuses. In his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, "On the Condition of the Working Classes," he called for just wage, an end to the abuse of women and children in the workplace, and raising the working class to a higher level of living. **Our ancestors followed the voice of the Good Shepherd with a faith much larger than a mustard seed; with a faith that could move mountains.**

October 14, 1917

Dear Sister Annie:

I write you these few lines to let you know I received your rosary, holy cards and box of candy. I was glad to hear from you and was glad to get them. I did not hear of anything about coming home. I hope we would be home soon. How is Pop, Mary and yourself? I hope you are well. Sometimes I hear we are coming home for Christmas. Sometimes I hear we are going overseas. Pray for the end of the war.

From your loving brother,
Charles
109th US Infantry Company C
Camp Hancock
Augusta, GA

This was part of a letter written to my grandmother from my great uncle, her brother. My grandmother was fourteen when she received this letter. Neither she nor her brother or sister was educated past the fourth grade. At fourteen she was the head of her household, her father a drunk and her mother dead. Since the fourth grade she worked full times binding books, she took care of her younger sister and was the only one to keep in touch with her brother away at war. She saved her money and paid for all his military fees. **My Grandmother followed the voice of the Good Shepherd with a faith much larger than a mustard seed; with a faith that could move mountains.**

The daughter of Immigrant Irish Catholics who eventually married the son of Immigrant German Catholics and settled in a German neighborhood in South Philadelphia. It was there my grandparents raised their son and daughter, my mother. Before the Second World War began, my mother and her classmates were well aware of the ills stirring in Germany. Educated by German Sisters of Christian Charity, letters were written by their fellow Sisters in Germany asking for prayers as things were not right in the "Old

Country." Many abuses, many are imprisoned. There will be a war.

Please pray. The horror relived. As my grandmother watched her brother go off to WWI, she watched her son go off to WWII.

From the personal memoirs of a priest who escaped the Nazi prison camp of Dakow:

There were 1200 priests in Dakow when I was there. The number of priests murdered there was between four and 6000. The regular rising time for prisoners was 5 a.m., but not for the priests because we were the servants of the people. And so we had to fulfill, as they said, the basic duties of "holy life." We got up at 3:30, carried the food to the block and remember, we had to serve 35000 in addition to our other duties. And we had to be ready for the regular detail of work. Some were farmers, bricklayers, carpenters, joiners. Some of us were horses attached to plows or to huge wagons, brought down to waiting trains. At the end of the day to bed. What a travesty. Three, four or five of us forced to use the same little cot. Cots were in tiers of four, the top only two and a half feet from the ceiling; 420 of us cramped into a room 24 X 30'. But we kept clean so the doctors could use us for medical experimentation. As a horse dragging a wagon down to the railway station, we contrived to have a wheel come off in front of the rectory. A hurried word was whispered to a priest in Latin and in the subsequent visit, hosts and wine were given to us so we could celebrate Mass. If we were ever discovered we would be killed. It was forbidden to gather in groups for prayer. After night call and bed check we would set our guards, darken our windows and the lucky one was chosen to be celebrant. For this momentous occasion he would carefully brush his pathetic prison garb, put the stole over his shoulder and by the small light of a smuggled candle begin the commemoration of that other great Passion of which their own was the physical continuation. We could understand the Mass. All would crowd

into the room with tears of joy running down our cheeks. Christ the Lord who knew what suffering was, was coming to suffer with us and bring us strength and consolation. Small hosts were broken into as many particles as possible so the greatest number could communicate. We missed some of the liturgy, perhaps, but I'm sure God looked down in that prison room and found a particularly refreshing response to his cry of love from the cross, "I thirst." There was nothing that could keep us from doing all in our power to be closer to God.

These priests followed the voice of the Good Shepherd with a faith much larger than a mustard seed; with a faith that could move mountains.

Thankfully my parents raised their children through no world wars but rather through sickness, unemployment, alcoholism, and the death of a grandson. They taught their children to be good to their God, their fellow man and their country, as evidenced by the vocations of their children, one son a priest, a daughter a doctor, a son a university professor, and their oldest son a pilot in the United States Air Force. We were taught by my father whose work ethic could never include the word "lazy," whose resourcefulness was remarkable; by my mother's determination and self confidence, which she instilled in each of the four of her children **My parents followed the voice of the Good Shepherd with a faith much larger than a mustard seed; with a faith that could move mountains.**

I watched my brothers and sister raise their children. I watched

them take their hand, tip it in holy water and teach them how to bless themselves. I watched my nieces and nephews receive their First Holy Communion and their Confirmation. My brothers and sister look at the present and to the future and they thank God for the strong Catholic faith they hand on to their children.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I look at the present and to the future and I thank God for my priesthood. I thank God for the Catholic faith I teach to my people and the students of our grade school and religious education program. But I also look back to the past. And I thank God for rich gift of the Catholic faith that my parents gave to me and my grandparents gave to them. Before my chalice was stolen from the sacristy at St. Benedict, each time I offered the Mass, I was privileged to put my fingers into the engagement ring of my Grandmother, and the diamond ring of my Grandfather, which were mounted under this chalice, to put my fingers where my grandparents, combined, put theirs for over a hundred years. And just below the cup were the diamonds from these rings. I am grateful for, and in awe of the Precious Blood consecrated in this chalice, and the rich gift of the Catholic faith given to me by my parents and which was given to them by their parents, who followed the voice of the Good Shepherd, and planted the mustard seed of my vocation to the priesthood.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, it is fitting for me to quote the Psalmist: "How can I make a return to the Lord for all the good He

has given to me? I shall raise up the chalice of salvation. And invoke the name of the Lord.”

This past fall, we began a Pray for Vocations Program here at SML. I'd like to roll out this program diocesan wide, asking families to pray for vocations. It's simple. Whether you live with other members of your family, or you live alone, sign up on the bulletin board outside the sacristy. Then when it's your week, go into the sacristy and sign out an icon and take a few holy cards. Then, every night for a week, either before dinner or at some mutually convenient time, pray as a family for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

May we follow the voice of the Good Shepherd with a faith much larger than a mustard seed; with a faith that could move mountains.