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For they were like sheep without a shepherd. (Mark 6:34)

16th Sunday Ordinary Time

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exordium

St. Mark says: “They were like sheep without a shepherd.” Today, we might speak of “a crowd of lonely people.” In fact, Mother Theresa, on a visit to the United States, said that she was very sad to see all the crowds of lonely people. This was an apt expression, because it had been a part of pop culture. The Beatles’ hit *Eleanor Rigby* had the refrain: “All the lonely people/Where do they all come from?/All the lonely people/Where do they all belong?” The sentiment is that the people are not only lonely but lost. The group Styx had a song *Lonely People*. One verse goes like this: “Lonely people, lonely people/Beneath these neon streets in subway seats they crowd for air/Lonely people, lonely people/so close and yet so far they share the secrets of despair.” These people are vulnerable to suffocating. And Dave Loggins had his own version, *Crowd of Lonely People*, which ends: “I saw a man of God and I asked help me (help me) outta here.” The speaker is seeking divine guidance.

narratio

But the Scriptures use an earthier metaphor: “They were like sheep without a shepherd.” A shepherd is one who herds the sheep, keeping them together, for a dual purpose. The shepherd leads the flock to green pasture, ensuring food for all. The shepherd guards the flock against predators, such as coyotes and wolves. The key point is that each sheep finds security in the fold. By remaining a part of the flock, each sheep enjoys pasture and protection.

propositio

It seems like *sheep without a shepherd* are like *a crowd of lonely people*, b/c both are lost and vulnerable and need guidance.

partitio

Lost, vulnerable, in need of guidance. Let’s consider each of these aspects as they pertain to the most important flock, the most important crowd: the Church.

confirmatio

Lost

In today’s Gospel, the crowd of people is lost, like sheep seeking green pastures. St. Mark tells us: “People were coming and going in great numbers/They hastened there on foot from all the towns.” These people are lost in the sense that they are restless inside; they aren’t at peace with themselves; they’re looking for something. They are seeking the transcendent. They are driven by a hunger and longing that leads them to Jesus. He has a certain wisdom and power that draws the crowd. He has something that they want. He’s shared some of that something with the apostles, who in turn have started to share it



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with others, and the news has spread. What is this “something”? The crowd really doesn’t know. Yet, the crowd knows this: no one of them can obtain that something by his own efforts. It must be received from Jesus.

Vulnerable

In today’s Gospel, the crowd is vulnerable, like a wayward sheep vulnerable to coyotes. St. Mark tells us: “[Jesus’] heart was moved with pity for them.” (Yes, Jesus pities them because they are lost.) But he also pities them because they are vulnerable. They are vulnerable precisely because they are lost. Unless they seek the *right* something, they will never find their way to the green pasture and will be gobbled up by a coyote. Unless they follow Jesus himself, they will follow some other blind sheep and be gobbled up. So “[Jesus] began to teach them many things,” says St. Mark.

In our society one of the lions to which we are vulnerable is what Benedict XVI calls Individualism. We enjoy a certain freedom and autonomy that, taken to an extreme, separates us from our brethren or the Church. We are prone to becoming lonely people. St. Mark warns against this. He says: “The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.” Notice: With their new-found learning and power, the apostles enjoy a certain freedom and autonomy, but they don’t stray far. They still depend upon Jesus.

Let me be more specific. This lion that the Holy Father calls Individualism manifests itself in various ways. I’ll cite two.

First, contention: whereby someone speaks against the Truth and makes himself the shepherd with the authority, effectively divorcing himself from the Church. So often Catholics graze the meadows of Church teaching with finicky fussiness, munching on the clover and the buttercups but avoiding the garlic. This is a dangerous thing to do. Holy Mother Church in her wisdom teaches us sure paths to salvation.

Second: ignoring the black sheep. Sometimes, we’re even in a little private war with the black sheep. If your experience is like mine, then you know that it’s always the other person’s fault; or usually. Nonetheless, the division is a problem for *both* parties. We are obliged to reach out to the dis-affected: it’s an expression of love, of Christian charity. And don’t we know this so well. Every time we ourselves fall into wretched sin, the Lord in his mercy forgives us when we repent. But notice this: that repentance and forgiveness so often comes when Jesus sends us the assistance of *another*: a friend, a confidant, a priest, maybe even a stranger, sometimes our own enemy. And how thankful we have been!

So let’s be wary of Individualism. We need to stay close to Jesus and the people that he shepherds. We rely on our brothers and sisters, and we have a responsibility towards them. Admittedly, this is an impossible task, impossible without Jesus’ help.

Guidance

Praise be to God, we do enjoy Jesus’ help. One way he shepherds us is through his ministers: our Pope Benedict, our Bishop Robert, your pastor Father Gerard, my Abbot



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Thomas. Through these shepherds Jesus continues to minister to us. This is so in many ways, but most especially through the sacraments.

Each of the sacraments wards off the lion of Individualism. Yes, each and every sacrament has a corporate dimension that protects us by drawing us into the Church, so that we aren't a lonely crowd, but a peaceful flock. Here are two examples.

*Baptism. Most of us don't remember this, as we were mere helpless lambs at the time. But through our baptism we became card-carrying members of the Church. We are meant to live out that baptism. Continually seek what Jesus offers. However you conceive of it – salvation, wisdom, peace, heaven – cultivate the hunger. Avoid the wolves that squash that hunger. Help yourself by frequenting Holy Communion and Reconciliation.

*Marriage. Through this sacrament the husband and wife become the nucleus of a family, a mini-Church, which goes *light years* towards sanctifying its members. Sometimes, coyotes endeavor to wreck the family. But the sacrament of marriage, as well as other sacraments, provide the grace to endure those attacks. Let's be sure to live the sacramental life.

peroratio

I'll close with a warning: we are *all* vulnerable to wolves; we are *all* vulnerable to falling away from the Church: monks, clerics, and laity alike. So pray with the psalmist: The LORD is my shepherd. Not: I am my own shepherd; rather, the LORD is my shepherd. I am lost, Lord, seeking my heavenly homeland. I am vulnerable, Lord, and one of my biggest predators is my very self. Grant me the grace, O LORD, to stay close to you always and be with you for eternity. Amen.