

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

May 11, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Acts 13:14, 43-52 (Paul and Barnabas attract many Gentiles to the faith.)

Responsory: Psalm 100 (We are his people, the sheep of his flock.)

Second Reading: Revelation 7:9, 14b-17 (The great multitude worshipping in heaven.)

Gospel: John 10:27-30 (My sheep hear my voice and they follow me.)

In today's gospel, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." But, who exactly are those people whom Jesus calls, "my sheep"? For many of his first disciples, the most obvious answer seemed to be, "the Jewish people." Numerous Old Testament passages refer to God as a divine Shepherd and the Chosen People of Israel as *his flock*. It seems like a fitting image, considering all the ways that God had cared for and guided his people throughout the centuries of their special, covenantal relationship. In addition, throughout history, God provided many *human* shepherds to watch over the Jewish people. For example, the Psalmists and Prophets spoke of Israel's *kings* as shepherds of the people, for they were anointed by God to share in his pastoral care of the nation. Chief among those anointed shepherds would be the long-awaited *Messiah*. When he finally came, he was supposed to lead God's faithful people into a new era of freedom and security, like a shepherd leading his flock to safe, verdant pastures. In fact, the gospel passage that we heard today comes from a discourse in the Gospel of John in which Jesus calls himself "the Good Shepherd," who lays down his life for his sheep. Nevertheless, many of the Jewish people did not accept Jesus as their Shepherd. Instead of following him, they condemned him as a fraud and a blasphemer.

That division among the Jewish people only deepened after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Apostles initially tried to win over their fellow Jews, thinking that all would eventually come to believe in the Risen Lord after hearing their eyewitness testimony. They had no intention of forming a whole *new* flock of believers to follow a new religion. Rather, they expected God's *traditional* flock, those who believed in the one true God of Israel, to rally around the One sent by the Father to be their new Shepherd and eternal King. Once the people heard the truth, they would surely recognize the voice of their Shepherd and follow him. That was the plan. But, as we see in the Acts of the Apostles, that vision of Christianity as simply the *fulfillment of Judaism* was soundly rejected by the vast majority of the Jewish people. At the same time, however, Paul and Barnabas discovered that a *whole new flock* of believers was emerging. *The Gentiles* began to embrace the Gospel with great enthusiasm. Surprisingly, *they* were able to hear Jesus' voice and follow him, believing in his promise of eternal life. And so, a *new* Church and a *new* religion appeared to be taking shape, one in which believers could still revere the ancient covenant and the commandments by which God formed his people according to his will, but their identity was grounded in communion with Jesus Christ. The bond that held this flock together was not a common religious or ethnic *heritage*, but a common *belief in Jesus Christ* as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

Paul and Barnabas saw Divine Providence at work in this new development. They recalled the prophecy of Isaiah which suggested that the Messiah would become a “light to the nations” and an “instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.” In the mind of the Prophet, that light would draw Gentiles to Jerusalem, where the Messiah reigned over his people. They would convert to Judaism, joining themselves to the Lord’s flock, and the Law of Moses would be their guide to salvation. Now, it seemed that God had found *another* way to reach all the nations. The Apostles and other Christian missionaries would share the light of Christ. Salvation would spread to all corners of the earth through the conversion of the Gentiles to *Christianity*, not to Judaism. Thus, in John’s vision in the Book of Revelation, the great multitude gathered around the throne of the Lamb have “washed their robes and made them white *in the blood of the Lamb.*” They are “from every nation, race, people and tongue.” Hence, this multitude represents all the peoples of the world who have come to believe in salvation *through the blood of Christ*, not through observance of the Mosaic Law. They have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and have followed him, in some cases, even to martyrdom. The whole flock is united, gathered around the heavenly throne to worship with *one voice and one faith.*

When Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice and they follow me,” he could be describing how these people who have come to believe in him will respond to his teachings and his call to follow the Christian way of life. However, he could also mean, “My sheep *are* the ones who hear my voice and follow me.” In other words, he could be defining what *makes* people members of his flock. Jesus considers all those who listen to his voice and follow him to be “*his sheep,*” regardless of where they come from or how they first hear the Good News of the Kingdom. All are welcome to join Jesus’ flock, and all who join receive an *equal* share in the promise of salvation. Some of the early Christians really struggled with that idea, because it granted Gentile converts equal status with Jews in the Christian community. Imagine that – *former pagans* being equal to the *children of the covenant!* But, in truth, God shows no partiality among those who accept Christ and follow him faithfully. Over the centuries, the Lord’s flock *has* expanded to encompass the whole earth, realizing John’s vision of one people, made up of believers from all nations, races, peoples and tongues.

In the 1960’s, however, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council realized that the Church’s understanding of “the Lord’s flock,” though quite expansive, was still too limited. Since the thirteenth century, Catholics had identified the Lord’s flock with *the Roman Catholic Church*, declaring that there was no salvation outside the Catholic faith. The Council fathers corrected that error. First, they reimagined the Church as the “People of God” and a “mystery” that transcends the human structures that make up the institutional Church. In other words, membership in the Lord’s flock is not strictly limited to those who profess the Catholic faith. Second, they also taught that divine truth and the means to achieve salvation can be found in other Christian churches and, to some extent, even in non-Christian religions. Hence, the path to salvation may not be as narrow and exclusive as previous Church teaching had so confidently proclaimed. The truth is, the Good Shepherd can and will use every means at his disposal to lead his *entire flock* to their heavenly pasture.