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Annunciation Church, Shumway, Illinois
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The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King (A)

We are gathered today by the Lord to celebrate a great mystery, to honor and adore the One who is both Lamb and Shepherd, who is both Shepherd and King, who is both man and God.

By and large the image of sheep is lost on us who have such limited contact and knowledge of them. Let us put it simply: sheep need a shepherd because they often stray away from the fold and find themselves in danger. Are we not very much like sheep? The prophet Isaiah says this of us: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

It is not for nothing that God sees his people Israel as his flock, as his sheep (cf. Ezekiel 34:11-12). With all of the passion of his love, the Lord says,

I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest... The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly (Ezekiel 34:15-16).

The life of a shepherd is not easy as he stands under the sun and moon, in the heat and cold, in the wind, rain, and snow with his sheep. So great is the Lord's love for his flock that he

himself weathers the elements with his sheep, he suffers with them and guides them along right paths (cf. Psalm 34:3).

There is something within us that inherently recognizes ourselves to be like sheep. This is why so many of us have an almost automatic love of Psalm 23, which begins, "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). The question, then, comes to us: How well do I listen to my shepherd and follow him? Do I know the voice of my shepherd? Do I let myself be led and guided by him?

One verse of Psalm 23 that is particularly comforting to many people is not sung in today's Mass: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). The staff he carries is the shepherd's crook, with its hook that is used for pulling back, prodding along and even an occasional knock on the head, in order to keep the sheep on the right path. The rod he carries is the scepter of a king, the symbol of his authority. What is the connection between these two?

Just after the Lord promises to judge between his sheep, he says through his prophet Ezekiel, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23). David, then, was appointed to govern and shepherd of Israel, the two chief duties of a king.

When the only Son of God took on flesh and became man, he did so to shepherd his flock both as the Good Shepherd (cf. John 10:14) and as their true and eternal King; he came to fulfill what began in David.

We see this most clearly in today's Gospel. He is the king who, like a shepherd, separates his flock into sheep and goats, into those who served him and those who did not (cf. Matthew 25:31-34).

Why is it that Christ, our King and Shepherd, will seek the lost and heal the sick, but destroy the sleek and strong? The lost and the sick are the sheep who, having heard the voice of the shepherd, have accepted his sovereignty and leadership; they accepted his love. The sleek and the strong are those who rely on their own power and strength and refuse to submit to the gentle yoke of Christ. They will not be pulled back from sin; they will not be prodded on to holiness; they will not take a knock on the head, even for the good of their souls. They will not kneel before Christ; they think themselves sovereign and free, but they are, in fact, slaves to themselves.

There is yet a further way that the image of Shepherd and King are joined together in Christ. John the Baptist announced Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Christ the Good Shepherd became a Lamb for us and in his vision of the heavenly liturgy, Saint John the Evangelist

saw "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6). The Lamb stands as though slain because he was in fact slain, but now is risen from the dead. The Lamb is victorious and "has put all his enemies under his feet" (I Corinthians 15:25). It is because of his victory over sin and death that the hosts of heaven cry out, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Revelation 5:12)! After this, John says, "And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever" (Revelation 5:13)! Then they fell down and worshipped him.

This Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ the King is the last Sunday in the Church's calendar; it is, in a certain sense, the culmination of the Church's year. Everything leads up to this day, to the celebration of Christ as King and we as his servants, just as everything in our lives leads up to our judgment before the Redeemer King. It is a call for us to recognize our true identity as servants and sheep, to accept the lordship of Christ over every aspect of our lives, to place ourselves lovingly in his service, to worship and adore him alone.

Because we are human beings, because we are both body and spirit, our worship of the Lamb is also done in both body and spirit.

When we enter the Church and approach the Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament, we perform an act of adoration, of homage; we make a genuflexion. This act of reverence that we pay to our Eucharistic King - to the Lamb of God - is one that we too easily take lightly.

The word "genuflect" comes from the Latin *genu flexio*, meaning "to bend the knee." From ancient times the knee has been seen as a symbol of strength; "to bend the knee is, therefore, to bend our strength before the living God, an acknowledgment of the fact that all we are we receive from him."¹

When we kneel before the Lord, the King of the Universe, we kneel before the humility of him who knelt to wash our feet. This act of adoration is an act of love and is the genuine response of faith to what the Lord has done.

Kneeling before the Eucharist is a profession of freedom: those who bow to Jesus cannot and must not prostrate themselves before any earthly authority, however powerful. We Christians kneel only before God or before the Most Blessed Sacrament because we know and believe that the one true God is present in it, the God who created the world and so loved it that he gave his Only Begotten Son (cf. Jn 3: 16).²

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. John Saward, trans. (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2000), 191.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 22 May 2008.

Whenever we bend the knee in church, let us do so purposefully and with great reverence, remembering always before whom it is we kneel. With this gesture, let us recognize him as our only king and serve him with great joy and devotion. Amen!