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13 April 2008

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday
The 45th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Today is traditionally known as "Good Shepherd Sunday," a very fitting title for what will occur in just a couple of days.

On Tuesday Shepherd One will land in Washington, D.C. and His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI will begin his five-day visit to these United States of America.

Why is the Pope coming? In a first in the history of the Holy See and the Papacy, the Holy Father sent a video greeting to the people of the United States in advance of his visit. The intention behind his visit, he said,

Is to reach out spiritually to all Catholics in the United States. At the same time, I earnestly hope that my presence among you will be seen as a fraternal gesture towards every ecclesial community, and a sign of friendship for members of other religious traditions and all men and women of good will.¹

Pope Benedict XVI is conscious that he is coming, "sent by Jesus Christ, to bring you his word of life."²

During his brief visit, the Holy Father will be in Washington, D.C. and New York City, two cities into which many activities are schedule for the Pope, who will turn 81 years old on Wednesday. Even so, Pope Benedict says to us:

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, 8 April 2008.

² Pope Benedict XVI, 8 April 2008.

I am very much looking forward to being with you. I want you to know that, even if my itinerary is short, with just a few engagements, my heart is close to all of you, especially to the sick, the weak, and the lonely.³

It is comforting to know that His Holiness remembers us in his prayers. We ought to remember him in ours.

We know that as the Vicar of Christ, the Pope, the Successor of Saint Peter, speaks on behalf of Jesus Christ. When we hear the voice of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, we hear the voice of Jesus Christ because the Pope shepherds the universal Church in the name of Jesus Christ.

When the Holy Father comes to us, he, together with the Bishops, will speak to us all. It will be as though the first reading occurs again: "Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and proclaimed" (Acts 2:14). Pope Benedict XVI will stand with the Bishops and proclaim "Christ our hope" (I Timothy 1:1).

If we listen to what he will say to us, what happened to those who listened to Saint Peter will happen to us: we will be "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). We will be cut to the heart because we will "recognize his voice" (John 10:4). We will recognize his voice because he, too, is the good shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). What do I mean?

³ Pope Benedict XVI, 8 April 2008.

Saint Augustine says of Saint Peter:

So, then, Peter is a shepherd, and a good one; nothing, of course, like the Shepherd of shepherds in power and goodness, yet a shepherd and a good one, nonetheless, and so are others of his kind good shepherds.⁴

Anyone who has followed the Papacy of Pope Benedict XVI - both in deed and in word - will know that he, too, is a good shepherd, for he, like Peter, has given his life for the flock.

He is a man who has given his life to Jesus Christ and who wishes to lead others, as a shepherd does, to Jesus Christ and for this reason he is coming to us.

When the Holy Father comes to us, he will bring us the word of life, Jesus Christ and this word will cut to the heart of those who hear it. He will say to us, as he said in his video message:

Yes, Christ is the face of God present among us. Through him, our lives reach fullness, and together, both as individuals and peoples, we can become a family united by fraternal love, according to the eternal plan of God the Father... I shall also bring the message of Christian hope to the great Assembly of the United Nations, to the representatives of all the peoples of the world. Indeed, the world has greater need of hope than ever: hope for peace, for justice, and for freedom, but this hope can never be fulfilled without obedience to the law of God, which Christ brought to fulfillment in the commandment to love one another.⁵

He comes to rekindle in us the hope we have in Christ the Good Shepherd.

⁴ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Homily for the Second Sunday After Easter*, 4. In Philip T. Weller, *Selected Easter Sermons of St. Augustine* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1959), 186.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, 8 April 2008.

What does the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd mean?

The Holy Father teaches us that in the early Church,

the shepherd was generally an expression of the dream of a tranquil and simple life, for which the people, amid the confusion of the big cities, felt a certain longing. Now the image was read as part of a new scenario which gave it a deeper content: "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, because you are with me." (Psalm 23:1, 4). The true shepherd is one who knows even the path that passes through the valley of death; one who walks with me even on the path of final solitude, where no one can accompany me, guiding me through: he himself has walked this path, he has descended into the kingdom of death, he has conquered death, and he has returned to accompany us now and to give us the certainty that, together with him, we can find a way through. The realization that there is One who even in death accompanies me, and with his "rod and his staff comforts me", so that "I fear no evil" (cf. Psalm 23:4) – this was the new "hope" that arose over the life of believers.⁶

It is this hope that the Holy Father will bring to us.

In his message for the 45th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, which we also celebrate today, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, "Vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life can only flourish in a spiritual soil that is well cultivated."⁷ This is true not only of religious vocations, but of vocations to marriage and of families, as well.

Let each of us, then, listen to the words of the Holy Father as he brings to us the message of Christ our hope. Let us pray that, through his Apostolic visit, the soil of our

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 6.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the 45th World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, 3 December 2007.

hearts might be well cultivated so that we might yield a rich harvest for the Lord. Amen!