

*Second Sunday of Easter – A Cycle
2005*

April 3,

Jesus didn't rise just for himself or just to show off that he could overcome the power of death. St. Paul tells us Jesus "was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for **our** justification." (Rom 4, 25) Or as we say in one of the acclamations after the Consecration: "Dying you destroyed our death, rising your **restored our** life..." We are used to thinking that after we die, our spirit moves on to wherever it's going: heaven, hell or purgatory and we'll be like angels from then on. Indeed our spirit does move on, but that's not the end of the story. We are not angels and never will be. Our spirit without our body is incomplete. Part of being human is to have a body, and Christ showed us in his resurrection what his plan is for all of us who believe in him and are faithful to him. Again we quote Paul: In the resurrection of the dead, our body "is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body." (I Cor 15, 42 – 44) We proclaim this doctrine every Sunday, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

In the midst of our celebration of the resurrection, the news has been preoccupied with death, the death of our Holy Father and the death of Terry Shiavo. I do not wish to slight the Holy Father, but I think I should give some teaching about medical moral issues connected with Terry Shiavo's death. I didn't prepare to say anything about the Holy Father this week because I didn't know when he would die.

When I was in the seminary, we learned in medical moral ethics that when a person is dying it is not necessary to use extraordinary measures to keep them alive. After all, death is the natural end to life in this world. A person **could**, of course, use whatever extraordinary measures were available to them, but they didn't **have** to. I think the death of the Holy Father illustrates this. Probably he could have gone to the hospital and they could have hooked up all kinds of machines on him to keep him alive for another few days or weeks or months, but he chose to stay at the Vatican and let nature take its course. Many times I have used this principal (that a person **can**, but does not **have** to use extraordinary measures to prolong life) in counseling a family whose loved one was near death and who was being kept alive in a purely artificial

way. Often times this principal applied to people dying of cancer, when extraordinary measures would simply prolong their suffering.

When we are dealing with a person who is in what is called a vegetative state, it becomes a little more difficult to know where to draw the line and that principle becomes more controversial. The general practice has been that if a person was in a permanent vegetative state, all life support **could** be, but not necessarily **had** to be, terminated. With Terry Shiavo, there **was** some controversy about whether she was in a permanent vegetative state. This is one of the problems with that diagnosis.

A year ago, the Holy Father addressed physicians, scientists and ethicists from over forty countries. He began by stating that medical science is still unable to predict with certainty who among patients in this condition will recover and who will not. He considers the word “vegetative” as a poor choice of words as a human being, even if seriously ill or disabled in the exercise of his highest functions, is and always will be a human being, and he will never become a “vegetable” or an “animal.”

He went on to say that the sick person in a vegetative state ...still has the right to basic health care (nutrition, hydration, cleanliness, warmth, etc.). He especially emphasized that the administration of water and food, even when provided by artificial means, always represents a natural means of preserving life, not a medical act. Its use should be considered, in principle, ordinary and proportionate, and as such morally obligatory. His words apply clearly to Terry Shiavo: “Death by starvation or dehydration is, in fact, the only possible outcome as a result of their withdrawal. In this sense it ends up becoming, if done knowingly and willingly, true and proper euthanasia by omission.” The Holy Father seems to admit to an exception to this principle when administering water or nutrition does not benefit the patient, but only serves to increase their suffering.

We get into a very dangerous area when we start using “quality of life” judgments about who should be allowed to live and who shouldn’t. Who is going to draw that line?

Just a week ago my aunt died. She was 95 and had suffered with

Alzheimer's for many years. She did not have a feeding tube, but was being fed intravenously. I do not know whether the Holy Father's remarks include such things as intravenous feeding. That's one of the questions I have about his address. As the family wrestled with taking her off intravenous feeding, they felt as if they would be killing her if they did, so they didn't. I'm sure their decision gave them some peace.

I'm not sure if all possible questions about this issue have been answered, but in view of what happened this past week, and in view of the fact that many of our families have to face these kind of issues from time to time, I felt something should be said to clarify the Church's stand on this. If there is an error to be made, the Church always prefers to err on the side of life.

Third Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

April 10, 2005

INTRODUCTION: In our first reading we hear Peter's first sermon which was on Pentecost Sunday. This was the same Peter who just a short time before had denied three times he even knew Jesus! His fearless address proclaims the resurrection of Jesus and he urges his hearers not only to believe in Jesus' resurrection but to conduct their lives in accordance with it. Notice one little detail. We are told he stood up "with the Eleven." It's one of many places in the gospels that the position of Peter is shown as primary among the rest of the apostles. This week our focus was on the successor of St. Peter, John Paul II. He was a worthy successor who also proclaimed fearlessly the good news of God's love for us and the salvation that is offered to those who faithfully follow Jesus Christ.

HOMILY: St. Luke gives us a beautiful story about the risen Jesus reaching out to two of his disciples who had given up all hope that Jesus was going to save them. They were thinking of the unjust way Jesus was judged and the horrible way he was executed. They weren't able to be convinced by any of the reports that were going around that Jesus had risen. Their journey often provides a pattern for us when we are discouraged or disappointed. Jesus does not let us walk alone. He tries

to teach us, especially through his word and Eucharist that he is always with us and that all will be well if we only listen to him and trust in him.

Trust is the opposite of fear, just as hope is the opposite of despair and discouragement. These were themes in Pope John Paul's entire pontificate. As he said at his inauguration: "Be not afraid." "Be not afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power... Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization, and development. Be not afraid. Christ knows what is in" us. The world, he reflected, was afraid of itself and of its future. To all those who were afraid, to all those caught in the great loneliness of the modern world, he said: "I ask you...I beg you, let Christ speak to [you]. He alone has words of life, yes, of eternal life." (from *Witness to Hope*, by George Weigel, pg 262) Like Peter in our first reading, John Paul was not afraid to proclaim faith and hope in Jesus our savior. John Paul learned this lesson of faith and hope himself at an early age. His mother died before he was 10. he lost his older brother by the time he was twelve and his father before he was 21. He survived, literally, the Nazi occupation of Poland until his country was "liberated" by the Communists in 1945. John Paul was almost 25 years old by that time. In his early years he risked his life by being involved in clandestine theatre, in defiance of the Nazi's. He was a good actor and a brilliant student. He was drawn toward the stage, drawn toward a life of intellectual pursuits and also drawn toward the priesthood. He chose the priesthood and was ordained at age 26. For the next 32 years he lived under the rule of Communism, first for about 12 years as a priest and then, for the next 20 years as a bishop. And then he became the 264th Bishop of Rome at the young age of 58. Through trust and hope in our Lord, he learned how to be brave, strong and fearless.

Without mentioning the numerous details in the 26 ½ years that John Paul has been pope and which we've heard about so much on TV this past week, suffice it to say his pontificate made a significant impression

on our world as well as on our Church. The story in St. Luke's gospel we just heard, of Jesus going out to walk with his two disciples, reminded me of John Paul who traveled to almost every corner of the world to bring Christ to people and to give people hope. Of course, the reason for his reaching out was his love, his love for God and his love for people. That love was returned this week in the crowds of people who attended his funeral.

I think also, in seeing all those people, it is an indication that people are looking for something transcendent, something more than having to get up in the morning, going to work, coming home and going to bed so they can do it all over again the next day. John Paul represented spiritual values, things that cannot be seen, but which we know in the depth of our hearts must exist. John Paul tried to show us how to discover the wealth that only loving and serving God can provide.

We pray for him, because maybe he wasn't perfect yet, but if he is already enjoying the perfect joys of heaven, our prayers are not wasted. God will apply them for some other worthwhile purpose, such as giving us another spiritual leader whose life will be dedicated to teaching us how to get along with one another and how to live in faith, hope and love. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

April 17, 2005

A friend of mine who was raised on a farm told me a little story about something that happened when he was young. They raised sheep on their farm and one of the ewes died while giving birth. The nine children in the family started taking care of the baby lamb. They fed it bottled milk, just like you would a little baby, and kept it near their house. It was like a pet to them and they all became quite attached to it. When it was fully grown, the children's father said it was time to sell it so he sent it off to market. The next night for supper their mother made beef stew and one of the older boys, (who was a bit of a tease) sat at the table and made a bleating sound (like the lamb) and suddenly no one was hungry. All the children believed they were eating their pet lamb,

which they weren't, but they thought they were. The mother of the children was not happy that no one was eating dinner that night.

Having been a tease myself when I was young, I had to laugh at the trick the older brother played on his siblings, but the story itself is somewhat sad. It illustrates how we become so attached to our pets. It's even more true of shepherds and sheep because a shepherd is with his or her sheep almost all the time. You probably wouldn't think of this unless you were raised on a farm or spent some time in the Middle East. Sheep require full time care and shepherds depend on their sheep for their livelihood, so they are together almost constantly. Each lamb has its own name, just as our pets do. And like our pets recognize our call and come running when we call them, unless they're cats, which are very independent, so also the sheep come running when their shepherd calls. Of course, even among sheep, there would always be one or two out of a herd who knew their shepherd's voice but who stubbornly would refuse to move.

Even though we do not see real sheep and shepherds very often, still the image of the good shepherd is very comforting to us. Psalm 23 is the best known of all the psalms: "The Lord is my shepherd." It symbolizes God's protection and care and guidance. But we cannot forget that there is another side to the idea that Jesus is our shepherd and Jesus reminds us of that today. If we belong to him we will hear his voice and come when he calls to us. Even though we are no stranger to him and he knows everything about us to the smallest detail, **he** can be a stranger to **us** unless we recognize and respond to his voice. And if it's not **his** voice we're hearing, whose is it? No one else will lead us to the happiness we desire.

A second image Jesus used in today's gospel is that he is the **gate** of the sheepfold. Whoever goes in and out through him will be safe and find pasture. Shifting the image just a little, I would like you to think of the **doors** to our homes. They let us in where we find safety and family. They close out people who shouldn't be there. They let us go out so we

can meet friends or make a living or buy things we need or do something fun. Doors and gates are important. And so is Jesus. When he is part of our comings and goings, when we make him central in our lives, when we ask his blessing on all our activities, our life will be secure and our happiness will be ensured.

Does this mean we will always be safe in this world? Bad things do happen to good people as we all know. And even many of Jesus' good friends suffered, some were even put to death. But it's not just to protect us in this world that Jesus came. The last verse in today's gospel is one of my favorites. Jesus said "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." Why doesn't Jesus keep bad things from happening to those who are faithful to him? That's a profound question, but one answer could be that life in this world is not where the abundant life can be found. And the reason Jesus came is so we can have abundant life. Even if we have looks, popularity, health, wealth, youth, wisdom and everything else our hearts desire, we don't "have it all." We'll always feel some emptiness in our hearts, because our hearts were made for perfect union with God, and we won't know what that's like until we get to heaven. And that's where Christ our shepherd wants to lead us and that's why he came to us.

One last thought. This week the cardinals enter into conclave to elect a new pope, the successor to St. Peter and visible chief shepherd of all God's people here on earth today. Everyone is trying to guess who it will be. I'll venture a guess, that it will be an older cardinal (maybe over 70) who will be from northern Italy. But then, the Holy Spirit could surprise us. The important thing is that we pray now for a leader who will inspire us to follow Christ more faithfully and who will be effective in leading us in love and faith.