4 C Easter 2025

Most High, Glorious God, who in your providential design, willed that your Church be built upon Blessed Peter, whom you set over the other Apostles, look with favor, we pray, on LEO XIV our Pope, and grant that he, whom you have made successor of St Peter, may be for your people a visible source and foundation of unity in faith and of communion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. *Ad multos annos,* Brother Leo, offering your Petrine ministry to the faithful and all people of good will, as encouragement for human and spiritual growth.

What’s in a name? 14th comes after 13th. Leo XIII is remembered for updating and revealing the rich patrimony of Catholic social doctrine. Catholic Social Doctrine, as an instrument of evangelization, places the human person and society in relationship, with the light of the Gospel. Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation, and preferential love for the poor, will be his involvement in cultural and social issues. Our Rule will involve us to work with our Holy Father, to respond to temporal affairs.

We have encountered several post-resurrection Easter appearances of Jesus. On this 4th Sunday St John brings us back to pre-Easter events and to Jesus’ teaching about the new life He envisions for us, His beloved. It is a gift to return to these texts. Just last Sunday we heard Peter being called, through his love for Jesus, to feed Christ’s sheep.

In our reflection for today we are hearing a description of who those sheep are, and how Jesus pictures feeding them spiritually: *“My sheep hear My voice. I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of My hand.”* This is a summary of Church life. First, there is what the sheep are doing—listening to Jesus, experiencing Jesus, living as disciples; followed by the sheep’s reality of receiving life from Christ, of having a secure eternal existence, and of being safe in His arms. A description of the life of the Church.

A crowd gathers around Jesus, certainly religious authorities and others. They pressure Jesus: *“Tell us plainly if You are the Messiah.”* Jesus has already spoken of Himself as the Good Shepherd. Jesus is known through belonging, listening, and following. Now, His identity becomes the focal point of rejection and division: *“My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”* Tension rages between revelation and recognition, between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, between Jesus’ words and the world’s response.

Jesus uses this shepherding image to describe His relationship with us. Jesus is the shepherd, we belong to Him, we recognize His voice, and we follow Him. A relationship dramatic and life-changing. Paul and Barnabas in our first reading, speaking boldly, are urging us to *“remain faithful to the grace of God.”* Are notJesus and His Gospel meant for everyone? Isn’t salvation open to all people?

When we are faced with divisive questions of belonging and privilege, we who hear the voice of God, are to respond boldly with an inclusive love, lifting any at the margins, and recognizing that salvation, all of ours, is bound up with one another. How do we know God’s voice except through proximity, or as Pope Francis of blessed memory said, through “closeness.” Isn’t he speaking of a profound incarnational presence? Which brings us to the dark reality of who’s in and who’s out. If we are urged to stand boldly at the margins, are we not required to take sides—God’s side—to stand with those who are without. With those outside the centers of power, we are compelled with humility and with courage, to choose “closeness.” This is Catholic Social Teaching—love in action—of being a shepherd whose voice echoes courageous inclusion.

Following Jesus the Good Shepherd takes risks, takes being uncomfortable, takes getting ourselves deep into the stuff of life, and recognizing the sacredness of each divine encounter. May we *“remain faithful to the grace of God.”*

Jesus has His own voice. Each of us has our voice. Growing up in Christian tradition, we learned to talk about Jesus in inherited language, a Christological language: Jesus as Savior, as Sacred Heart, Giver of the Spirit; Jesus as true God and true Man. This language was hammered out over the centuries and was necessary for community life and worship. Basically it was somebody else’s language. Obviously we were borrowing another’s voice.

We’ve learned about the faith, in classic theological language: the Nicene Creed. For 1700 hundred years, we remain faithful to God’s grace, believing that faith seeks understanding. What we have received as faith, we appropriate as understanding.

Our voice is also a Franciscan voice when we make ourselves available to the experience of the human condition: to go out to the peripheries of today, to make the Gospel resound; not to forget those who are without, the migrants and immigrants, the elderly and the lonely, who are the body of Christ. In the words of our belated Pope Francis, “as penitents you are distinguished by your creative and genuine social charity, your closeness, compassion and tenderness” *(2021 General Chapter OFS).*

*“Habemus papam,* we have a Pope”—Leo XIV. The election of American-born, Chicago-native, Peruvian-missionary, Augustinian-friar has taken for his name—Leo XIV—whose predecessor gave the Church Catholic social teaching built on three foundational principles: human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity. Be aware of our new Pope Leo explore radical changes in politics, economics, and society. He will be the voice advocating a just and merciful society, and will provide a balanced, moral vision that rejects extreme ideologies.

As Secular Franciscans in this Jubilee Year of Hope, may we be brothers and sisters of hope and instruments of peace, called to live this in fraternity, bringing peace and joy into real everyday situations in human relations, in social and political engagement, with esteem and reverence for all people, and possible respect for those in civil and ecclesial authority. We are minstrels of the Lord, singing joy into joyless hearts.

