

The Good Shepherd

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Readings: Acts 4.8–12; 1 John 3.1–2; John 10.11–18

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The Fourth Sunday after Easter is called “Good Shepherd Sunday,” because for centuries the Roman Church has read John 10 on this day. Christ is the good shepherd, but the Fathers and Doctors also apply this Gospel passage to the Church’s other shepherds, namely, the bishops. The teaching of Thomas Aquinas, along with some of the sources he used, sheds light on how the bishops are meant to follow in the path of Jesus the good shepherd.

The Charity of Christ

As a good Catholic theologian, Aquinas relies on the testimony of his ancestors to articulate his teaching. He cites Augustine’s explanation of how bishops participate in the Lord’s office: “There is but one Shepherd. For though the rulers of the Church, those who are her sons, and not hirelings, are shepherds, they are all members of that one Shepherd. His office of shepherd he has permitted his members to bear. Peter is a shepherd, and all the other Apostles: all good bishops are shepherds” (*Catena Aurea*, vol. 4, *St. John*, 350).

This participation in Christ requires sharing in his graces and virtues in a particular way; the bishop can only lead others to faith and grace if he has already received these things himself and experienced living them fruitfully. This means excelling in both the active and contemplative lives, because a bishop must have internalized the divine truths he communicates to others (*ST* IIa-IIae, q. 182, a. 1, rep. obj. 1). “For no one is a good shepherd unless he has become one with Christ by love, and has become a member of the true shepherd” (*Commentary on John*, ch. 10, lect. 3, para. 1398). Becoming one with Christ by love, or charity, is Aquinas’s primary way of speaking about the office of bishop. Like other Christians, the bishop must possess charity, but he has a particular role of communicating it to others in order to bring about their spiritual perfection. This is what Thomas means when he describes the episcopacy as a “state of perfection,” for the bishop seeks perfection himself and helps others to do the same (*ST*, IIa-IIae, q. 183–84). This does not mean that a bishop is already a perfect person, but rather that his office requires that he keep himself free from sin, especially public sin, for the sake of righteousness.

Qualities of a Bishop

Aside from possessing charity and communicating it to others, the bishop ought to have other personal qualities, which Thomas mostly takes from the Letters to Timothy and Titus. When Paul says that a bishop should be *not given to wine, not a striker, but modest, not quarrelsome, not covetous* (1 Tim 3.3), Thomas explains that the Apostle wishes to remove three vices: concupiscence, anger, and avarice. Drunken men easily come to blows, behavior that is opposed to Christ’s command of announcing peace, while a bishop who is covetous easily falls away from justice through bribery (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 3, lect. 1, para. 102). When Paul says that a bishop should be the husband of one wife,

this does not mean that bishops must be married. Thomas acknowledges two reasons for this Pauline instruction. First, marrying a second time after the death of the first wife was seen in Paul's time as a sign of an inability to keep chastity. Second, and more importantly, marriage represents the union between Christ and the Church; prior to his ordination, the bishop's life should model this fidelity to one spouse (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 3, lect. 1, para. 94–96).

With respect to behavior, the Angelic Doctor offers a short summary of what distinguishes a good bishop from a bad one. First, a good bishop seeks the good of his subordinates rather than his own private good. Second, the good bishop loves his flock, whereas the bad one does not. Finally, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sake of his flock when danger threatens (*Commentary on John*, ch. 10, lect. 3, para. 1402–50).

Preaching and Teaching

Aquinas treats priests and bishops as more or less equivalent regarding the celebration of the Eucharist, so he does not give extended attention to this aspect of the bishop's office. Instead, he emphasizes what he considers the bishop's primary tasks: preaching and teaching. "The work of this office is to preach the truth; for this is the duty of preachers, namely, to preach the truth" (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 2, lect. 1, para. 69). He explains that there are two elements in preaching: "the announcement of the truth and instruction in morals; and the preacher should do both" (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 2, lect. 1, para. 69). The performance of these duties is Thomas's primary reason for prioritizing the active life of the bishop over a life of mere contemplation (*ST*, IIa-IIae, q. 187, a. 4, obj. 2; *ST*, IIa-IIae, q. 188, a. 6, resp.). Time and again Aquinas emphasizes the importance of the bishop's preaching for the unity of the Church and her faith.

Aquinas explains that the bishop preaches and teaches God's revelation rather than his own ideas. "The mark of the true shepherd is to enter by the door, that is, by the testimony of Sacred Scripture" (*Commentary on John*, ch. 10, lect. 1, para. 1369). Thomas uses a tender image to describe this love for sound doctrine: "so a bishop must hold knowledge in his embrace, clinging to it firmly with his mind and heart: *she hastens to make herself known to those who desire her* (Wis 6.13)" (*Commentary on Titus*, ch. 1, lect. 3, para. 22). It is vital that the bishop always keep to this teaching and never forsake it, for "to depart from the doctrine with which the Church instructs her children is not the mark of a good minister of Christ" (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 4, lect. 2, para. 151).

Aquinas not only identifies a close relationship between charity and true doctrine, but also says that one of the bishop's duties is to correct lapses in doctrine out of love. Thomas sees moral failing, rather than intellectual error, as the root cause of false doctrine, and he insists that the bishop know how to address the problem (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 1, lect. 3, para. 18). In the first place, he must be a good man who can induce the erring to virtue (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 1, lect. 3, para. 23). In more serious cases, however, the bishop has a responsibility to impose excommunication, which is a coercive measure, precisely as a work of charity (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 1, lect. 4, para. 53).

Governing

In addition to preaching and teaching, bishops are responsible for governing the Church, a task that Aquinas characterizes in several ways. He says that a prelate of the Church is called a "householder" (Luke 12:39) on account of the three duties he must perform: engender the faith in others, instruct them for salvation, and guard them securely (*Commentary on Titus*, prologue, para. 1). The last of these is most closely tied to governance, which is a matter of both restraining human wickedness and supporting and guiding the faithful with his power and wisdom (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, prologue, para. 1). Bishops have many duties of governance, such as overseeing prayer and worship, appointing men to ecclesiastical office, managing the Church's temporal goods, and ensuring good order among widows. The bishop must *impose not hands lightly upon any man* (1 Tim 5.22), meaning that he must carefully select and test those ordained for the priesthood (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 5, lect. 3, para. 225). When accusations are made against priests, the bishop must verify that they are supported by the testimony of two or three witnesses (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 5, lect. 3, para. 219).

Dealing with Failure

Although it may appear that Aquinas expects every bishop to be a saint, he is well aware that this is not normally the case. One of numerous reasons he discourages men from aspiring to the office is that he knows that most do so out of desire for honor, power, or other temporal things (*Commentary on 1 Timothy*, ch. 3, lect. 1, para. 88–89). Thomas cites Gregory the Great about the problem of bishops who are hirelings rather than shepherds, who desire the good things of the earth and rejoice in the pride of station (*Catena Aurea*, vol. 4, *St. John*, 351). But the Angelic Doctor and the sources he cites offer more than just criticism or exhortation to greater virtue by suggesting some ways of dealing with weak bishops. First, they discourage making rash judgments about the character of such men. In the words of Gregory the Great, “Whether a man be a shepherd or a hireling cannot be told for certain, except in a time of trial. In tranquil times, the hireling generally stands watch like the shepherd. But when the wolf comes, then everyone shows with what spirit he stood watch over the flock” (*Catena Aurea*, vol. 4, *St. John*, 351). Second, they remind the reader that even the hireling can do the Lord’s work, and the Lord is capable of speaking through him. According to Augustine, so long as there is no danger, the hireling can be useful and therefore should be tolerated (*Catena Aurea*, vol. 4, *St. John*, 352). In the words of Gregory, “Many that seek temporal advantages in the Church, preach Christ, and through them Christ’s voice is heard; and the sheep follow not the hireling, but the voice of the Shepherd heard through the hireling” (*Catena Aurea*, vol. 4, *St. John*, 352–3).

Conclusion

It may seem that Aquinas expects too much from bishops, but this owes not to naiveté or lack of experience, but rather to a keen sense of the dignity and responsibility of being a successor to the Apostles and a pastor of souls. Ordinarily the faithful have little control over who is appointed to this office, but we have a duty to pray for our bishops, so that like Jesus, they may be good shepherds.

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For Further Reading

- ***Thomas Aquinas, [Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels](#)***
- ***Thomas Aquinas, [Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon](#)***
- ***Michael Sirilla, [The Ideal Bishop: Aquinas's Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles](#)***

In Short . . .

- ***Bishops participate in Christ the Good Shepherd.***
- ***Bishops have a particular role in leading others to charity and spiritual perfection.***
- ***Episcopal preaching and teaching bring about the unity of the faith.***
- ***Good governance sometimes requires punishing the wicked out of love.***
- ***One must pray for bishops and not rashly judge the imperfect.***