

Ex 19:2-6a
Ps 100:1-2, 3, 5
Rom 5:6-11
Mt 9:36—10:8

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Shepherds and the need of prayer

Recently, I had occasion to search the web for postings of current openings for Catholic school presidents. Some schools were looking for the ideal candidate – Jesus Christ – while others were more mundane accepting the fact that most candidates would have weaknesses to accompany their strengths. A composite of the more realistic job descriptions would look something like this:

Looking for a strong Catholic, loyal to the Magisterium, who lives the faith in his daily life. A compassionate, caring leader who can bridge gaps between parents and teachers, school and parish. Works well with the ethnic diversity. Promotes academic excellence. Able to use limited resources creatively.

The list goes on. Perhaps our high expectations indicate why candidates are so few. But I believe there is another reason. When you boil it all down, what we are looking for is a shepherd who is compassionate. No job description indicated they wanted a bureaucrat, someone who focuses on keeping the machine well oiled. No, in addition to providing a good education they wanted a person who cares for human beings, their families, their problems, their heartbreaks and joys. Being a shepherd of a Catholic school demands a total human being. A shepherd is one who Jesus calls in his sinfulness and redeemed in his brokenness.

Matthew states that Jesus was moved with pity and compassion when he saw that the crowds were *troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd*. Interestingly enough, he did not form a blue ribbon committee or do a study. Rather he told his disciples to pray. So must we. Obviously, I believe that committees and surveys have their place. But they can never replace prayer – first, foremost and always. Over the years I have seen groups generate wonderful documents which have made zero difference. At the same time I have seen people, apparently having less talent and resources, who did things which really mattered. Their secret: prayer.

Prayer begins with God's initiative. Gervase Corcoran, O.S.A., an Irish Augustinian, shares a rather poignant understanding of how God is the author of our prayer life:

People, left to their own, cannot find words to pray. The words of

prayer are received, put into our mouths by God...Prayer then is speaking to God but the words are received from God. These words bring an opening of the self to the one true God.

Today's scripture passages clearly reveal the theme that God takes the initiative in our lives. God took the initiative in the reading from the Book of Exodus in forming a covenant with the Israelites. Paul states in his letter to the Romans that God took the initiative in loving us because Christ died for us while we were still unrepentant sinners. Finally, in Matthew's gospel we see Jesus once again taking the initiative in reaching out to the people who were troubled, abandoned and without a shepherd.

We must pray for our shepherds. For sure, we are asking that God will send us the right person to shepherd our schools as well as other ministries. But, you know, sometimes we stop praying when the person assumes his task. We need to pray that God continues to guide those who responds to his will.

In a passage that perhaps contains a bit of humor, Pope Gregory the Great spoke about the need for laborers in Lord's harvest. While asking the people to pray for their priests, he complained that even though he had quite a few priests, he did not have many workers! Now, I doubt that St. Gregory intended his priests to become frazzled workaholics. But he did want them to focus on what was most essential: "Pray for us that we may be able to labor worthily on your behalf." Then he added, "That we may not grow weary of exhortation."

As shepherds we priests whether in schools, parishes or other ministries must encourage and inspire others. For that reason we need the people's prayers so that we do not become downcast, bored, tired. In the same way other shepherds need our prayers. One class of shepherds that need our continuous love, prayers and support are fathers of families – happy Fathers Day. They have a unique and irreplaceable shepherding role at the very heart and nucleus of society, the family.

Shepherds called by God to service, whether schools, parishes or other ministries, need our prayers. God once again takes the initiative to provide them for our benefit and edification through love. Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send the good shepherds we so badly need. The harvest indeed is abundant, but laborers are few.