

Good Shepherds

Christmas Eve/Day (Readings from the Mass at Dawn)

December 25, 2025

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This past year, we experienced an important event in the life of the Church: the death of one pope and the election of another. You may recall that Pope Francis appeared in St. Peter's Square on Easter Sunday 2025 after a few months in the hospital and passed away early in the morning the next day. Then, in a very quick conclave, the cardinals coming from all over the world elected the US-born bishop, Cardinal Robert Prevost, as the new pope, who took the name Pope Leo XIV. This was a big surprise to everyone.

In our Gospel reading from Luke chosen for this year's celebration of Christmas, the Nativity story is told from the perspective of the shepherds. It begins with the shepherds being instructed by angels to go to Bethlehem, then the shepherds finding Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, then them relaying the message from the angels, and finally them leaving to go back home full of joy. In reflecting on the Nativity story from the perspective of the shepherds this year, I couldn't help but warmly think of the shepherd of the global Catholic Church up until April 21, 2025, Pope Francis. He truly was a good shepherd.

In his autobiography, *Hope*, released a few months before he died, Pope Francis reiterated his preference for changing our terminology about how we speak about leadership in the Church. He said, “a bishop or priest who is out of touch with the people is not a shepherd, but an official.” (206) Later on, while speaking of the new cardinals he created in 2024, he said, “I created them...with the intention that the title of ‘servant’ – here in the sense of ministry – should increasingly obscure that of ‘eminence.’” (289) To this day, we still call cardinals ‘your eminence’ and bishops ‘your excellency,’ which are very far removed from the title ‘shepherd.’ Finally, he said, “those who do not go out of themselves gradually become intermediaries, managers, instead of being mediators. And they become sad. They become sad priests who turn into collectors of antiquities, or of novelties, which is the same in the end, rather than being shepherds with ‘the smell of the sheep.’” (179) All of these sayings about priests, bishops, and cardinals could apply to all of us. How close are we to the hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties of humanity?

One of the symbols of Pope Francis that stands out to me the most was his cross. In his autobiography, Pope Francis shared that immediately after his election as pope, he was taken into what's called ‘the Room of Tears’ off of the Sistine Chapel, the place where the cardinal changes clothes into his new papal attire. While in that room, the one assisting him offered him a beautiful golden cross to wear around his neck to which he replied, “I have this

nickel silver one from my episcopal ordination, I've been carrying it for 20 years," so he decided to keep his old one. On the cross, which is a little rounder at the part where the two beams intersect, is a shepherd holding a sheep on his shoulders, along with many other sheep in the background on the cross beam. A larger version of this cross now hangs above his tomb at the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. It is very fitting that he chose a less precious medal signaling his poverty along with the image of a shepherd signaling his humility. Since Pope Francis' election, many other newer bishops have chosen to use replicas of his cross to show their support for carrying out their pastoral and episcopal ministry in poverty and humility.

The shepherds at the manger call us to be a humble and poor Church, like the one envisioned by Pope Francis.

Where do I see a humble and poor Church at work in our world today? Where do I see a triumphant self-serving Church? How can I know the difference?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may be more like the shepherds in this years' Nativity story. They came in haste to see the new-born child just as they were, with the smell of the sheep still on them. May we be that close to the places where Christ is being born anew today.