

## Being on Guard Against False Shepherds

When I look at my faith journey, while I've always considered myself Catholic, it hasn't always been smooth sailing from learning the basics of the faith to where I am today.

For one, as I always say, I am a work in progress. I am trying to grow in faith and holiness as my life goes on. I will always make progress, but also fall at times too, which is why I need to pray, to continually learn about my faith, and to listen to God and trust in the guidance of the Church He gave us.

Of course, being human, at times I have had a hard time doing that.

I think back to high school. It was my first experience meeting people of other faiths, and I got involved in a Christian Bible study club that would meet before school once a week. It got me to thinking about other denominations of Christianity, and I had a hard time understanding why the Catholic Church was distinctive, especially when an adult leader who was a staff member at the school I admired commented once that the Catholic Church "didn't preach the truth." I did not leave the Church, but I certainly struggled for a time. Thankfully my parents were patient and this experience actually in the long run made my faith stronger.

No one in that group was trying to lead me out of the Catholic Church. However if you think about it, there are so many false shepherds out there to lead people astray.

Jeremiah the prophet in our first reading this week says "woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture." It's good advice, because we have to be on guard to make sure we don't go astray. False shepherds come in many forms. Sometimes we may even become one unknowingly. Other times we may just drift. So what is the key to making sure we listen to the true shepherd?

The starting point is prayer and remembering the words of Jesus, namely when Jesus says "behold I am with you always until the end of the age" in Matthew 28:20 and Matthew 16:18 when Jesus says "you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it." Jesus is King forever, and is with us. It's why we need to pray daily and listen to His guidance. But He also gave us a Church; His Church; one, holy, apostolic. Not 2 churches or 20 or 120. This is why it's so important to trust in the Church. The Church is there to guide us. Sometimes that will be a challenge and we might not like what the Church says on an issue. But the Church is not there to win a popularity contest; the Church is concerned for our salvation. It's why the bishops have to sometimes speak out and act, as they have in recent times with respect to marriage and this year as they look at the issue of those in politics who publicly support abortion. Their guidance may anger some, but we do not want to be like the angry child who doesn't get his or her way. You may have heard the term "Mother Church" and She is there to guide us, so trust in the Church even when it's challenging because She has one thing in mind: your salvation.

Second, we have to be on guard against false prophets who try to lead us astray. They are everywhere. Case in point, last week I was in Red Wing to get some doughnuts. (I realize most people look at me and say that guy is skin and bones he needs to eat something but yes, I do like doughnuts and Hanisch Bakery is the best around). A couple of doors down a church had opened up in a retail space. Some of the signs included “how could God send anyone to hell” and “God didn’t create one church” and various other signs. It was a small “community” church and my sense is they just went with the lyrics to John Lennon’s “Imagine” and formed a church. Sadly false prophets come in many forms; the Mormon or Jehovah’s witnesses who convince people to leave the Catholic faith; the evangelical Christian who convinces the Catholic that the Church has lost its way; the atheist who convinces the Catholic there is no God. Or the schismatic who has left the Catholic Church and joined a splinter group claiming to be the “true” Catholic Church. This is not to say there are not very good people of other religions or who have no religion. But it is to say people can be led astray through conversations they have. It’s why we have to be so vigilant in our evangelization and re-evangelization of those who may be lukewarm in their Catholic faith by knowing our faith and talking about it.

Third, we have to be on guard too against the worldly prophets who say God is one thing among many. A big concern I have is with kids who are raised in households where God is seen this way; where they are told school matters, sports matter, busyness matters, but Church doesn’t really matter. Now at least there may be elements of the faith there, but this gets back to why re-evangelization is so important. It matters so much to learn the faith and to build our spiritual house on the rock solid foundation of God and to come to know who God is. This is why faith formation is so important and as a priest I want to do all I can to help people on their faith journey. With respect to our youth, I’m so thankful this week to welcome Gabriel Leahy to our parish, he has accepted the position of Coordinator of Youth Evangelization & Discipleship. He’ll be working with Kayla Rooney our Director of Faith Formation. It’s been great to see our faith formation program grow in recent years, and let us never forget that parents are the primary educators of their children in faith, and it’s so important to send the right message. We help them in this though for we are a community as a Church, and now more than ever we need to help each other grow in the faith, especially our youth who are subjected to so many false prophets.

Fourth, beware of the false prophet of pride. Remember the devil’s sin was pride. Sometimes we can think we know better than the Church, or make ourselves the center of the world and don’t listen to others who are trying to help us. Ego can be healthy, but unchecked it can lead us astray.

And lastly, as I said sometimes we can be a false prophet. It’s why it’s so important to be introspective and say “what kind of message do my actions say about my faith.” If you are of Generation X like me you might remember the many anti-drug ads of the 80s including the one where the father finds his son with marijuana and says “who taught you how to do this” and he says “I learned it by watching you dad!” Well sadly, sometimes people learn bad things by watching us. We all have bad days and

moments, it's called being human. But we examine our conscience and strive to send the right message to others through how we pray and go to Mass, through our love of neighbor, through tolerance, through a good work ethic, and through making sure our priorities are straight.

Yes, false prophets are everywhere. And sadly they often succeed because the true prophets don't speak up. So let us not be afraid to evangelize and re-evangelize and set the world on fire. It takes time and patience is often required, especially when we see people making a bad choice. But we must never give up or think we can't make a difference, for when we speak up, when we lead by word and example, and don't give up, we just might be surprised how many souls we lead to heaven through helping others see the truth and reject the false prophets in their lives.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul