

## OF CROZIERS AND CROOKS

I grew up in a family that was basically free of prejudice. I was encouraged to go to synagogue with Jewish friends. My parents had African-American guests in our home. But there was one exception to the unbiased nature of my upbringing: my father had little tolerance for Roman Catholicism. I remember, for instance, in 1960, his being a very strong supporter of Richard Nixon, partly because Dad was a good Republican, but also because of his concern that putting a Catholic in the White House would be a real mistake. Dad made no secret of his strong dislike for Catholic church government, Catholic doctrine and the Catholic emphasis on Mary. So it took me quite a few years to grow out of an essentially inbred prejudice against Roman Catholics.

But in time, though, I did. My study of church history in seminary and grad school led to a real appreciation of our Catholic roots and of many of those who have been canonized over the centuries. Working side-by-side over the years with some exceptional Catholic colleagues has given me a deep respect for their dedication and devotion. I've even come to understand the emphasis on Mary. And for the last twelve years or so I've had two different Roman Catholic laywomen who've served as my spiritual directors.

Don't misunderstand—you're not going to be calling me Father Danner anytime soon! I'm willing to make sacrifices for my calling, but Linda's not one of them! I have no desire or intention of becoming a Roman Catholic. Still, I no longer see Catholics as substandard Christians, nor do I see the papacy and the Catholic hierarchy as major affronts to the gospel. I don't think it's the best way to run a church—but it certainly is one way. And a way, just like the congregational way, that is often blessed by God. At this juncture in time it is also a way that is very much in the news around the world.

So, as cardinals from around the world prepare to gather tomorrow to discern who will become the new Vicar of Christ—the new Bishop of Rome—the new Pope—let us use this occasion to reflect on what makes for a good pastor. In particular, let us explore what John Paul II may have taught us about that office, that role. For in the end, despite elaborate titles and rituals, that is what the Pope is, a pastor.

One of the things that divide most Protestants from Roman Catholicism is the question of authority. Historically, Roman Catholics have looked at the traditions of the church and the scriptures as sources of equal authority. The question "How has it been done through the centuries?" is for most Catholic leaders as important as the question "What does the Bible say about it?" One of the rallying cries of the Reformation though was *sola scriptura*—scripture alone. And from the days of Martin Luther and John Calvin, most Protestants have emphasized the need to

understand the Bible alone as the ultimate authority. In fact, sometimes Protestants have been derided for having in the Bible a “paper Pope.”

Over the years I have moved from having a fairly typical Protestant mindset, seeing scripture as the only authority, to seeing scripture as having equal weight with tradition and with personal experience. God’s will, I believe, *is* made known to us in the words of scripture, but also in the traditions of the church and in the elements of our own experience. Still, scripture is always a good place to start. And our lesson from John’s gospel does provide some important insights into what makes for a good pastor.

The first part of the lesson is a parable about shepherds and sheep.

It made sense for Jesus to use shepherd imagery. After all, every one of his listeners must have known a shepherd or two. Some were, no doubt, shepherds themselves. But for us twenty-first century American suburbanites, it is an unfamiliar image, so some explanation is in order.

We tend to think of sheep as being rather dumb. But the sheep of that day were actually rather intelligent. However, they had few natural defenses. Therefore one of the chief jobs of a shepherd was guarding the sheep against predators, both animal and human. The shepherd’s staff, or crook, was both a weapon, used to beat off wolves and thieves as they tried to make off with a sheep, and a tool for pulling sheep back into the flock if they got too far a field and were in danger of going over a cliff.

At night the shepherd would sometimes team up with other shepherds so they could take turns sleeping. They would gather at special sheepfolds constructed out of stones piled in rough shaped walls. At the entrance the shepherd would hold his staff very low—like a limbo stick—and each sheep would squeeze under it very slowly, giving the shepherd time to check and see if any of them had been injured during the day. If they had he would carefully wash their wounds and sooth them with olive oil.

After the sun set one of the shepherds would lie in the entrance of the fold to protect the flocks. In a very literal sense, the shepherd became the gate, laying down his life to protect the sheep. “Very truly,” says Jesus, I am the gate for the sheep.” (John 10:7)

By morning the sheep were all mingled together. But as each shepherd called, the sheep, each recognizing their own shepherd’s voice, would sort themselves out and follow their own shepherd out to the day’s pasture. “I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus, “I know my own, and my own know me.” (John 10:14)

One last detail. We tend to picture sheep being driven along a path by a fellow carrying a long stick, aided perhaps by a Lassie-look-alike dog nipping at their feet.

But in the Middle East it was different. For sheep were not driven, they were led. One scholar writes: “The shepherd *leads* . . . and the sheep themselves, instead of being stupid and apathetic, respond to his call . . . and follow along . . .” (A. C. Bouquet, *Everyday Life in New Testament Times*, 142)

A shepherd then is one who protects the sheep, knows and calls them by name and leads them along life’s paths. No doubt Jesus knew all this as he told this parable. But of course he wasn’t really talking about shepherds. “I am the good shepherd,” he says. He was talking about himself. It is instructive to note that the word “pastor” comes from the Old French word for shepherd. And, in the context of the church, the pastor takes as his or her primary model, Jesus, who is *the* shepherd. The Good Shepherd.

John Paul II held views that I personally feel were just plain wrong. His stance on the use of contraception and abortion. His refusal to allow women positions of power in the church. His understandings of homosexuality. These were, and are, things that I found especially frustrating about him. But they *all* grew out of his sincere desire to protect the church and to protect its members from what he felt were matters of grave moral importance.

But he was also tireless in speaking up for the poor. He was fearless in his efforts at peacemaking, willing in turn to denounce the warmaking efforts of both of the world’s great powers in his time, the Soviet Union and the United States. As one writer puts it: “In fact [John Paul II] might not fit neatly into America’s perception of either [conservatives or progressives] . . . . Neither [group] can honestly or fairly claim a hold on the pope’s beliefs . . . . By American standards [a politician who held his views] would be [considered] a confused politician . . . .”

(Marcus Mrowka, “Remembering a Sometimes Progressive Pope,”

[www.campusprogress.org](http://www.campusprogress.org))

But John Paul II, though very politically astute, was not a politician. He was a pastor. And his views grew out of his conviction that what he was preaching and more importantly what he was doing, were things that would safeguard his flock. His papacy was marked, I would suggest, by his desire to be a good shepherd, a good pastor, even as his whole career had been.

It was a cold day in January, 1945. Edith Zierer was just thirteen. She had spent over two years in a Nazi labor camp, where she slowly wasted away. While there, her mother had been exterminated at Blezec, so too her father, at Maidanek, and her sister at Auschwitz.

But Edith was free. Free and very, very frail. When she got to the train station near the labor camp, she was barely able to climb aboard a coal car as it left. The cold air whistled though her tattered prison uniform, and when the train finally stopped, she got down, stumbled onto the platform and into the next station, where she huddled in a corner, literally on the verge of death.

No one paid her much attention, until a young man in a long black robe approached her. He asked where she was going, and then got her a cup of tea, some bread and some cheese. Edith didn't know her parents were dead, and hoped to find them in Krakow. But she couldn't even stand, much less walk. So the young man gathered her up in his strong arms and carried her to the waiting train, helped her into one of the cattle cars, and then climbed in beside her. He took off his cloak and wrapped it around her fragile form, and then made a fire to help her stay warm. Despite his kindness, Edith was worried that he might try to force her to go to a convent, and when they arrived in Krakow, she ran off. He called for her over and over again, but she hid behind some milk cans. And when he couldn't find her, he finally left the platform.

But Edith didn't forget him. She even wrote his name in her diary. Karol Wojtyla. And, thirty-three years later, when she read that the young seminarian who had saved her life had become Pope, she wept in joy. And, many years later, in 1997, she finally had a chance to meet him again, and thank him for what he had done. After he had held her hand, and given her a blessing, he said, as she was leaving, "Do come back, my child."

Recounting the story, reporter Roger Cohen writes: "What moved this young seminarian to save the life of a lost Jewish girl cannot be known." ("John Paul II: A Family Memory," *New York Times*, 4-6-05) But I would beg to differ. I think it is very clear: from the beginning he had a pastor's heart. From the beginning he was a good shepherd. He was vigilant, courageous and most of all loving.

Karol Wojtyla addressed Edith Zierer's needs as best he could, met her where she was, and lovingly helped her survive.

And maybe, in the end, that is what it means to be a good pastor, a good shepherd. I'm not saying it doesn't involve preaching and teaching and even, from time to time, evangelism. For surely it does. But I keep coming back to the words of another great Catholic, Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary, use words."

As the cardinals meet in the days ahead, I hope and pray that the Pope they elect *will* have a far more progressive approach when it comes to sexuality. I hope and pray that he will see the incongruity of being opposed to abortion while not allowing poor women and others to make choices around using contraception. I hope and pray that he will be more open to the gifts women bring to the church and move towards their ordination. I hope and pray he will see gay and lesbian persons as accepted by God for who and what they are. In many ways I hope the next Pope will be quite different from John Paul II. But I also hope that he will be like him in one crucial way: for I pray that he will have his predecessor's heart, a pastor's heart.

**For John Paul II did indeed preach the gospel by the very way he lived. And while I often disagreed with many of his words and many of his views, I could not help but be impressed by the way he lived for his flock. He was constantly vigilant. He was fearless in his courage. He was patient in his love. He was a good shepherd who tried to follow the example set by *the* Good Shepherd. I pray that I and all who are pastors might seek to do the same. For in the end it is all about lovingly helping the flock along life's journey, even, as the Psalmist put it so eloquently, "even if one walks through the valley of the shadow of death."**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**