

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
April 17, 2016

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Simply by virtue of being alive, human beings have three fundamental and paramount needs. *First*, all souls must be admitted to the state of salvation. Our Lord Jesus came to save all men from their sins because all men need saving from their sins! *Second*, all persons, no matter their race, religion, or culture, need spiritual liberty. That is to say they need the freedom to pursue their highest end. And *third*, all souls need to be provided with the means to grow towards the highest end.

These fundamental and paramount needs are assured to the flock of Jesus Christ in His Church, His Mystical Body. Our Lord says, "I am the door." He says, "By Me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved." That secures our *salvation*. He says, "They shall go in and out." That gives us *liberty to pursue truth*. And the Lord says of them "They shall find pasture." That is the *means of growth* all souls require. The food Our Lord provides is the food of eternal life.

Proof of Christ's desire all men be incorporated into His mystical Body is seen in the terms of His invitation. The Lord says, "Come unto Me all ye that travail and are heavy laden." Name someone excluded from such an invitation! Who is possibly exempt? Rather, *all* are invited. *All* are eligible. And it is when a soul is secure in its home in the Catholic Church that it flourishes. It is able to exercise all its God-given powers and claim its full participation in the world the Creator has made. And while it does this the soul finds pasture. Secure in the Mystical Body of Christ, the soul is thereby enabled to convert to God's use all the opportunities and comforts earth provides. Doing that, the soul is able to take up the Lord's invitation to become a co-creator in the ongoing life of the world. All of that and more is what Our Lord Jesus means when He assured us "I have come that ye may have life and that ye may have it more abundantly."

The Lord Jesus had his little flock in mind *as it then existed*. That is what Saint John implied in his gospel account. John heard our Lord preach about being the Good Shepherd. He heard Jesus say, "My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me." That was already happening, as described in the gospels. Jesus had a following. And of them, and with the ongoing life of the Church in His Divine Mind, the Saviour said something nearly incredible. He declared, "That

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which My Father hath given unto Me is greater than all.” (This is at the very least a sustainable alternative translation of the Greek text of verse 29). In the Lord’s preaching we get the assurance that even the tiny original nucleus of the nascent Catholic Church is stronger than all the opposing powers of earth and the devil. Why? Because faithful souls are in the Hand of God. The Fold is impregnable because no one can snatch the sheep out of the hand of the Father. And what is true of the Father is true of the Son.” Jesus declares, “I and the Father are One.”

That declaration is the beginning of what ultimately led the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Church to the dogma of the One Divine Nature in the Trinity. Those theologians, including St Athanasius, drew on the consideration of Christ’s mission and His relation to the Father to develop a theology of the inner life of the Holy Trinity. That work was only delayed until the long period of (at least *external*) persecution was over.

But we do not have to wait until the 4<sup>th</sup> Century to get the immediate and comforting image Our Lord left us as remembered in St John’s chapter ten. It is an image of something available to Christian believers from the very beginning. The sheepfold that is the Catholic Church is impregnable because *Christ is the Door*. Any Palestinian shepherd would understand the significance right away. A western tourist to the Holy Land once found it quite remarkable a Bedouin sheepfold was so strongly built and yet had a wide entrance with no door or gate. “Where is the door?” he asked. And the shepherd replied, “*I am the door*.” Once he had safely enclosed his flock, the shepherd stretched his own body across the open gate. To get at the sheep any predator would have to cross the shepherd. Is that perhaps the origin of the phrase “over my dead body?”

In telling us “I am the Door” The Blessed Lord assures us our salvation, our freedom, and our means of grace, all the fundamental needs of all souls, are absolutely secure within the Catholic Church. Why? Because the Good Shepherd sleeplessly guards His Fold with His Life.