

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 12, 2019
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It is God's providence that for this lifetime all souls are inextricably connected to physical bodies. And souls have three fundamental and paramount needs. *First*, they 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, because they need the freedom to pursue their highest end. *Third*, all souls need to be provided with the means to grow towards that end.

These fundamental and paramount needs are assured to the flock of Jesus Christ. That flock is His Mystical Body, the Church. Our Lord says, "I am the door. By Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved. They shall go in and out." *Going in and out* gives us the spiritual liberty to pursue truth. We have God's permission to pursue truth. And the Blessed Lord goes on to say "They shall find pasture." The food Our Lord provides is the food of eternal life. This is the means of growth all souls require.

The Lord desires all men to be incorporated into His Mystical Body and issues the invitation. "Come unto Me all ye that travail and are heavy laden." Just who exactly is excluded from such an invitation? Who is possibly exempt? Rather, all are invited. All are eligible. All are in need. And a soul flourishes when it is secure in its home in the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, His Catholic Church. A soul is able to exercise all its God-given powers and can claim its full participation in the world God made. All the while it does this, a soul finds pasture. Secure in the Mystical Body of Christ, the soul is enabled to convert to God's use all the opportunities and comforts earthly life provides and 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 assures us "I have come that ye may have life and that ye may have it more abundantly."

Writing his gospel many years later, St John recalled that when Our Lord Jesus declared "I am the Good Shepherd" He had His little flock in mind *as it then existed*. When the Lord said, "My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me" that was *already happening*. Jesus had His following. And of them (as well as looking down history into the future of His Church) the Saviour said

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something nearly incredible. He said, “That 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 in John 10:29). In the Lord’s preaching we get the assurance even *the tiny original nucleus* of the Catholic Church is stronger than all the opposing powers of earth and the devil. Why is that? Because the Lord’s disciples are in the Hand of God. The sheepfold 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. For the Lord declares “I and the Father are One.”

That declaration, “I and the Father are One” is the beginning of what ultimately led the Church in the 4th Century to the dogma of the one divine nature of the Holy Trinity. The work of later theologians drew on the consideration of Christ’s mission and His relation to the Father, and developed the theological expression of the inner life of the Holy Trinity. The opportunity to do that followed the long period of persecution of the early Church.

Before Christianity got that far, however, there was a more immediate and comforting image Our Blessed Lord left us in St John’s Chapter Ten. It is an image that was available right away to that tiny, persecuted nucleus of believers at the end of the First Century. The sheepfold that is the Catholic Church is impregnable because Christ is the door. Palestinian shepherds would understand the significance right away even when this is not so obvious to the urban-dwelling first-world experience. There is a story of an American tourist in the Holy Land finding it quite remarkable that a Bedouin sheepfold was so strongly built and yet had a wide entrance with no door or gate. “Where is the door?” the tourist asked. And the shepherd replied, “I am the door.” Once he had safely enclosed his flock, the shepherd stretched his own body across the opening, and that is where he spent the night. No harm got to the flock except over the shepherd’s body. Perhaps that is the origin of the phrase, “Over my dead body.”

In telling us “I am the Door” Our Lord Jesus assures us our salvation, our freedom, our means of grace, the fundamental needs of all souls, are *absolutely secure* in His Mystical Body. Why? Because the Good Shepherd vigilantly guards His Fold with His Life.