

Fourth Sunday of Easter/Annual Diocesan Scouting Mass

April 22, 2018, St. Augustine Cathedral, 3:00 p.m.

I look forward to this Diocesan Scouting Mass very much every year. What makes this gathering even more special this year is, not only do we get to celebrate this Mass on one of the first real Spring days, but we get to do so during this beautiful Easter Season. A “bonus” for this year is that our celebration takes place on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, which is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”. Scout Leaders and Good Shepherds have a lot in common----they both love those who are entrusted into their care, they look out for them, they protect them, they teach them the values of good and holy living, and they teach them to take care of themselves.

As we know, Jesus is the Good Shepherd---He is the personification of what we heard Him talk about in the Gospel passage we just heard. Jesus made a comparison between a Shepherd who does what he does out of love for the sheep as compared to what we might call a “rent-a-shepherd”----somebody you find on Ebay or “Craig’s List”. The “rent-a-shepherd” would high-tail it out of the pasture, abandoning the sheep if a fierce wolf came looking for dinner. The “Good Shepherd” would do whatever it took to protect the sheep and chase the wolf away, even if it meant laying down his own life. And that is, in fact, what Jesus has done for us through His suffering, death and Resurrection, as He has conquered the ultimate power of sin and death; He has redeemed us and brought us into His New Life through our Baptism into Christ.

Jesus loves each and every one of us with the Love of the Good Shepherd, and so it’s wonderful for us to celebrate this Annual Scouting Mass on Good Shepherd Sunday in the midst of this Easter Season.

There are also others in your lives who practice that same kind of “Good Shepherd” love for you, most especially your parents. They are the ones who love you more than you can comprehend; they love you unconditionally; their love for you is “priceless”, and it’s limitless; it’s a love that knows no bounds. Parents’ love for their children is the closest human analogy there is to help us try to understand Jesus’ Love for us, His Sheep.

Scout Leaders have many of the same qualities as they care for, and care about, the Scouts they help to guide. They are dedicated, committed, and, just like the “good shepherd”, they are not “hirelings”; they don’t do what they do for their own profit or financial gain; they do what they

do because they are so committed to helping young people to grow, mature and develop their God-given talents and abilities.

At the end of Mass this afternoon, during the awards portion of today's celebration, a number of awards will be given to Scout Leaders in recognition of those who, during this past year, were exemplary in their various roles of leadership. Of course, we are very much aware that there are many others, both present and not present, who have made sacrificial efforts to assist our young Scouts in their personal growth and development. In addition to the Adult Leaders who will receive awards, of course, many of you will receive your badges, patches, medals and awards---you will be recognized for your growth and advancement along the Scout Path.

One of the reasons why I really appreciate this annual Diocesan Scouting Mass each year so much is because, at its essence, the Scouting Program, which is geared toward developing strong and capable individuals, who are growing into patriotic and dedicated citizens of our great country, in many ways parallels the Church's commitment to the development of each individual Baptized young person's spiritual development and life of virtue.

We're all familiar with the "Scout Oath"----that "I will do my duty to God and my country...to help other people at all times---to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight". And that Scout Oath is quite consistent with the "vocation" that we all share through our Baptism into Christ that commits us to "love God and our neighbor as we love ourselves" and to work for justice and charity here in this part of our world, and to help build God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace.

In a similar way, we know that the "Scout Law" commits us to develop the 12 traits of a good Scout: to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. Isn't that very much like Jesus' challenge for us to live our lives based on the Two great commandments to Love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Those Scouting traits are also very similar to Jesus' teaching for us to live our lives according to the eight Beatitudes of: being poor in spirit; willing to mourn with people who struggle; to be meek; to hunger/thirst for what is good and true; to be pure of heart; to be peacemakers; and to be willing to suffer to stand up for what is right.

Scouting calls us to be good and loyal citizens; Jesus calls us to be virtuous and holy Saints. They serve as parallel tracks for us to become good and holy people in this world, and in the Life to come.

I'm sure we would all agree that it is much more difficult for an individual to come to these good traits and a life of holiness on his/her own; we need help, guidance and encouragement to learn these secular and holy virtues. The Scouting Program helps to develop those patriotic good traits; the Church helps us to develop the life of holiness. And to have a Scouting Program that is sponsored by the Church through our local parishes and to have the support and direction of the Bishop, our priests and lay leaders is the best of all worlds.

Just last week, Pope Francis wrote the whole Church a beautiful letter on pursuing the universal Call to Holiness entitled "*Gaudete et Exsultate*" / "*Rejoice and Be Glad*". Our Holy Father tells all of us that: "*Holiness means being loving, not boring.*" As he goes on: "*To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious....We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love, and by bearing witness (to God's Love) in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.*" (#14) And that includes in our School work, in our Scouting projects, in our social media activity, in our family life---in everything we do.

Isn't it true that when we think of holiness, we sometimes think of stone-faced Saints, who don't look like they were ever allowed to enjoy life, or to express humor, or to have fun. Once again, Pope Francis tells us that is not the case, as he writes: "*Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, Saints are joyful and full of good humor.*"

Your efforts in working hard to earn the religious emblems of our Scouting program is an important part of the process of growing in your Catholic faith, as well as helping you to live good and holy lives, even as you are preparing yourselves to be good, contributing and patriotic members of our society.

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel: "*I am the Good Shepherd. I know mine, and mine know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father. I will lay down My life for the Sheep.*" That is the definition of unconditional Love that we experience in our relationship with Jesus, as we see it lived out in the sacrificial Love of parents for their children, and as it forms the foundation for our Catholic Scouting Program.

On this special day, I would ask you to do three things. First of all, try to picture Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and His desire to love you, to keep you protected from all that is evil, and for you to stay close to Him so you don't get lost along the way as you journey through your life. Jesus will never abandon you or let you down. And so, I encourage you: open your heart to Jesus and allow yourself to truly fall in Love with Him Who loves you unconditionally. Allow Him to help you to be Holy. As Pope Francis writes so beautifully: "*Do not be afraid of Holiness...become what God the Father has in mind when He created you....Do not be afraid to set your sights higher....Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit.*" (#32,34)

Second, see your participation in the Scouting Program as a wonderful way to grow in your devotion to all that is right and good in the world around us. Our world is good, but we need help in knowing how to avoid some of the evil that we find in the world. Let your Scout Leaders, Volunteers and your fellow Scouts help you to do that, so that you can avoid the pitfalls, and become positive and generous citizens of our country.

And third, finally, as you commit yourself to live your life according to the values of the Scouting Program, also commit your lives to follow Jesus the Good Shepherd throughout your life. Always follow Jesus' voice who calls you by name. Try to love as Jesus loves; try to live according to the virtues that Jesus teaches us in the Beatitudes. In other words, be joyful and courageous Witnesses to your Faith, and let your light shine to the world around you. Try to live truly holy lives which will help you to find true happiness in this world, and will certainly lead you to eternal happiness with God in Heaven.

God bless you, now and always.