

**Homily for May 6, 2001  
4th Sunday of Easter Cycle C**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Acts 13:14, 43-52  
Revelation 7:9, 14b-17  
John 10:27-30**

## *We hear the Lord's voice in word and in song.*

The gospel of Saint John is famous for the image of sheep and shepherd: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.”

This season of Easter is the traditional time in which the homilies are designed to instruct our neophytes in the faith. But in the process, quite naturally, and graciously, we all get instructed in the faith – in our prayer practice – why we do it and what we do. That's why our newly received are so valuable to us – they provide the occasion to renew our faith – the faith of everyone. Today's Gospel, John chapter 10, invites Jesus' followers to hear the voice of the Lord. This is hard to do today: telephones ring; beepers summon us; e-mails arrive; spouses, children and careers make endless demands on our time, energy, attention, dedication. We have homes to clean or to repair, meals to cook, newspapers to read, children to take to endless sporting events. There are more pernicious demands: drinking, gambling, drug use, pornography. Even our shopping or television-watching can become an addiction, a host of voices that drown out the voice of the Good Shepherd. Where? When? ...do we meet and do we hear the Good Shepherd?

When preachers and musicians argue about whether the homily or the music is the most important part of the liturgy where we hear the Lord, the musicians always have the last word. Usually they say, “No one ever left the church on Sunday humming the homily.”

And they are right. What we sing here on Sundays has a way of getting into our souls – it's a way of opening us to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Once we recognize that the Sunday Mass is not something that we watch, but something that we do – all of us – then we ask: How? How can we say that 40 or 400

or 14 hundred persons in a room around a book and a table can all be the ones that make this liturgy?

Song is one of the answers to that. Perhaps it is the first answer. We come here and we assemble and then we have a choice of how we understand every song that comes from us. Some would observe what goes on here and say: Well, yes, the ritual takes place, and now and then we stop and sing a song, or maybe we sing as background while something else is taking place. That's one way to explain our singing here at Mass.

But the other way to understand what happens here is this: The people assembled here, all of us, sing our liturgy. The liturgy isn't something that stops so we can insert a song; it isn't something we can add singing to as background music. Rather, the liturgy is something people sing. As one writer puts it, “Ours is not a spoken liturgy in which some things are sung; rather it is a sung liturgy in which some things are spoken.” The liturgy is something people sing. Singing is one way we can say that this liturgy is done by everyone here. It isn't something extra, something to make things longer or more solemn. Our singing is us doing the liturgy. It is the Church doing what the Church needs to do – and we are the Church – lots more than a building.

We Catholics who are old enough remember the days of high Mass and low Mass. High Mass had singing, but not often by all the people, usually it was by a choir. Sometimes one person played the organ and sang all the parts. Sometimes a choir learned elaborate settings of the words. And then there was low Mass with no singing. When the bishops of the world at the Second Vatican Council began the renewal of the liturgy, they did away with this distinction. Singing was to be restored to the people at every Sunday Mass. The past 30 years have witnessed many efforts to give song to the people, but it has clearly been difficult. Lots of people went off in lots of directions. Many well-

intentioned but sometimes silly things have been written and sung. But much has been learned also, and there is need now to get on with the challenge.

Why is it challenging for us? Why don't we want to get in here and raise the roof with our songs? I can think of two reasons, for starters.

First, we Americans don't sing; we hire people to do our singing for us. Thanks to the amplifier, the Walkman and Muzak, we have music in our ears more than any people ever. But we don't have it in our throats. We listen. We're the audience. We watch. Just walking through these church doors doesn't change that. Song has been woven thoroughly into the ordinary lives of ordinary people through most of human history. We've had work songs, holiday songs, lullabies, love songs, campfire songs, political songs, children's nursery rhyme songs, and jump rope songs, protest songs, patriotic songs. These have been songs for the people, for us. But there isn't much of any of that anymore. So we come here cold. We come here expecting someone else to do the singing. And that is a terrible clash. No one else can sing the Mass for us. If we don't do it, all of us together, it won't be done.

A second reason then that makes singing here such a challenge: we believe that deep down, it really doesn't matter if "I" sing or not. How could it matter what I do? I'm just the person on the end of the nineteenth pew. I'm maybe one who slips in and out without a word to anyone, or I may really look forward to gathering here with people I know. We put ourselves down or somebody did it for us – told us it didn't really matter if I sing because I sound so bad: "If you hear me sing, it would peel paint and give offense like body odor." But we do matter and we don't sing at prayer to sound good. We sing to be one, to be connected, to be the Body of Christ, and there is never a bad sound for that purpose; any and all sounds add to the beauty of the Body. God gave each of us a voice and we're to give it back to God transformed into the Body of Christ.

Both challenges affect all of us. We're not used to being singers; we like to listen. We're not used to thinking of ourselves as the ones responsible for the liturgy; we just come to pray. No amount of urging, demanding, begging, is going to change that for a lot of us. Maybe all that can change it is good experience. To be even once in the midst of an assembly of people who sing with delight and from their hearts can open the eyes – and the

mouth. Suddenly I know what song is meant to be, a way that diverse human beings can have solidarity with one another. Suddenly I know that this gathering isn't about my praying – that can go on all week – it's about the Church praying, and prayer of this church is louder and softer than any speaking voice; its needs to hold on to songs longer or let sounds go more quickly than any speaking voice.

Remember last week how I mentioned the three levels of participation at liturgy – the first one was purely physical – among the things physical was singing. But the other two levels were interior and consisted in a sense of the body acting – and song is a key element in the body being aware that it is a body, acting as a body and not just as a bunch of individuals each doing his or her own thing.

When we have the experience each Sunday of the liturgy sung by all, we know without anything being said that this song of the Church takes many sounds and that we need all of them. We need the short songs like the Alleluia and the "Holy, Holy" and the Great Amen. Songs like these are how a crowd of people can make the Church's prayer; we don't all have to say everything, but we all sing our agreement and our praise.

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In the end, Catholics are human beings and human beings have known for a long time that they leave the ordinary speaking voice at the door when they come to do the things that matter most in life. But we know that makes singing more vital for us is this: when we come through these doors, what we do we do as the Church. Singing – where the voice of the individual is taken up into the voice of the assembly – singing is how the Church does what it must do and delights to do: the repentance, the praise, the thanks, the intercession that is the singing voice of Christ in this world.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." We hear the Lord's voice in word and in song.