

ERROL LOBO: THANKSGIVING MASS

St Francis Xavier Parish Community, Armadale

20–21 April, 2024

Perhaps many of you are wondering why the preacher at Errol's Ordination Mass of Thanksgiving has come all the way from the East to be with him, his family, and this parish community of St Francis Xavier. Let me explain. Some years ago I was contacted by a lecturer at Notre Dame University with the request to examine a Masters Thesis in New Testament studies. I agreed and in due course began to read the thesis. When you've been on the academic track for as long as I have, you can tell very early when a thesis is going to receive the highest grade. Just a page and a half of Errol's was enough for me to make that judgment—and my co-examiner was of like mind. So when the examination process was complete, I asked if I could be in touch with this gifted student and so, largely by Zoom at first, we became friends and I suppose I took on the role of mentor in his regard.

We share, you see, a speciality in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Allow me, therefore, to linger a little on St Paul.

You will see that Errol's ordination card depicts the moment when Paul's life, which was going in a cruel and fanatical persecuting direction, was turned around by the power of God's grace and sent in the opposite direction to preach the Good News of God's love. By his own account, Errol's sense of calling to the priesthood that led him to

join the seminary here in Perth, was not prompted by such a dramatic turnaround. But, like St Paul, he has felt the power of God's grace and the call to place his life and all his gifts as instruments in its service.

St Paul was a man of great energy, who undertook immense and dangerous journeys to spread the good news as widely as possible. He founded communities of people who, in the midst of the hard and cruel world around them, would live out and bear witness to the hope and joy that the Good News had kindled in their hearts.

Your patron here in this parish community is St Francis Xavier, generally acknowledged to be the greatest missionary of the Church since St Paul. I know Fr Mark is very pleased that the window dedicated to Francis Xavier is on show for the first time on this weekend of Errol's Thanksgiving Masses. Francis Xavier was a young student of great promise at the University of Paris. Apart from his studies he excelled in athletics and, coming from an aristocratic family and with an attractive personality, seemed set for high office in the service of his country. He helped coach less academically gifted students, one of whom was a fellow Basque called Ignatius Loyola, a former soldier, who had himself undergone a remarkable conversion. Gradually, Ignatius managed to lift Xavier's horizons beyond those of this world alone to give himself—and again his tremendous energy—to the full vision of God and God's outreach to the world, to become, like Paul, a most effective instrument of grace. Since Francis Xavier's missionary efforts began—though certainly did not end—in India, it is fitting that we are honouring his memory on the occasion of a gift that

India, through Errol's family—Edward, Renne, and Erline—have made to the archdiocese of Perth and, I hope, in a scholarly way, in due course to the wider Australian church.

Paul and Francis Xavier were energetic instruments of God's grace. A third person of energy—as I have learned trying to keep up with him over the last couple of days—is Errol himself.

But enough of Paul and Francis Xavier, and even Errol, for a moment. Let's turn to the central image that our celebration of the Word puts before us today: that of Christ as Good Shepherd. What an attractive context it provides for Errol's first celebration as minister of Word and Sacrament this weekend!

The image of Christ as Good Shepherd, despite some depictions in art that have long been around, is not a weak or sentimental one. It is a strong image. Shepherds at the time of Jesus were not softies. They had to be tough to endure long hours out at night on the cold hillsides, on the watch for predators and thieves. They didn't have a great reputation; some were regarded as dangerous. Jesus calls himself a "*Good Shepherd*" perhaps because there were plenty of bad shepherds around.

He lists two qualities of a good shepherd. A good shepherd really *knows* his sheep. A good shepherd is prepared *to lay down his life* for his sheep.

On Friday evening at the Ordination, as many of you who were present would remember, Archbishop Costelloe began his charge to the ordinands, Errol and Jason, by saying that a priest is one who must

communicate a knowledge of God and an experience of God to people. He has to do that in the increasingly secularised society that is the Australia in which we live. No easy task—yet one that is vital if justice, compassion, care for the marginalised and fragile, is to be preserved so that all Australians, and not just a fortunate few, may have a decent human life, and a sense of meaning and accountability beyond the material world that we see and touch and hear.

The great Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who won the Nobel Prize, told an interviewer not long before he died:

‘[The] biggest shift in my lifetime has been the evaporation of the transcendent from all our discourse and our sense of human destiny’. The outcome ‘is exile into a universe with no up or down, no internalized system of what is right or wrong no sense of a spiritual roof over our heads’. People focus on the immediate, because they feel they can have no larger perspective on their own lives.

That is very widely situation that as “stewards of the mysteries of God”, to use Paul’s phrase (1 Cor 4:1), priests in Australia today have to confront.

As we heard in the Gospel, God the Father sent the Son into the world to communicate true knowledge of God and to be the very image of God in the world. Jesus himself is the Shepherd who, in the words of the parable he told (Matt 18:12–14), would leave ninety nine

sheep to fend for themselves for a while in order to go after the stray, the lost, the silly, the stupid one because that one—and each one of us—is so precious in his Father’s sight. Each one of us has been and remains that strayed and straying sheep that Jesus seeks out to bring back to the hospitable home of the Father. That is the experience of being grasped by God’s grace and mercy that Errol has mentioned on his card.

Jesus, as we know, performed that searching for the lost at the cost of his own life. He was the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

As the Paschal Candle reminds us, we are in the joyful season of the resurrection. As risen Lord, about to depart finally to the Father, Jesus passed on his role as Good Shepherd to St Peter—to Peter who had failed, denied, and deserted him at the time of the Passion. But, back in Galilee, by the lakeside, Jesus reinstated Peter without a word of reproach, asking only three times, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15–17). Do you love me enough to be a good shepherd as I have been? And Peter, did in the end, like Jesus lay down his life for his sheep (see 21:18–19).

And so Jesus continues his role as Good Shepherd in the pastoral ministry of the church: primarily in the Papal ministry, which continues that of Peter, currently exercised by Pope Francis, but in all who participate in that role as ministers of Word and Sacrament. It is not just that priests try to imitate the Good Shepherd as a model. The risen Lord continues to exercise *his* ministry as Good Shepherd

through them. Each morning in prayer we receive afresh that awesome role in all its dimensions from the Good Shepherd himself. Each evening we report to him on how it has gone. And, whatever the ups and down, the successes and failures of the day, the only question he asks is “Do you love me and have you fed my flock?”

Here in this parish community and beyond you have all experienced Errol’s Paul-like energy. As I have observed over this weekend, he already has a remarkable knowledge of you by name. We hope that he won’t be literally laying down his life just yet, save in the sense of the day by day self-sacrifice and generosity that true priestly compassion and service requires. We thank God for the gift that Errol already is and the promise for the future that it so richly contains.

Brendan Byrne, SJ,
St Francis Xavier’s Parish, Armadale, WA,
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