Thought for the week

The smell of humility

Pope Francis once asked his priests to be 'shepherds with the "smell of the sheep"'. He was asking the people entrusted with caring for the flock within the Roman Catholic Church to be shepherds and pastors who are really with and among their people. This image reminds us of Biblical shepherds who lived out on the hillsides with their sheep, probably sleeping inside the sheepfold and, as in another Biblical passage, using their own bodies to be the gate, keeping the sheep safely inside their space at night. We can easily imagine in that scenario a shepherd who not only smells but actually reeks of the sheep they are called to care for. The shepherd in Biblical times would have been more at one with the sheep than with the people who were living in houses down below the fields. They were like the sheep and trusted by them. These shepherds would have been completely immersed in the world of caring for their flock, so much so that they soaked up the smell of the animals.

In today's world, what Pope Francis was asking was for people to lead their communities in a similar way. He wanted the leaders in his church to be connected to people in the real world around them and active in playing a part in every aspect of their community to the extent that they would soak up the 'smell' of that reality, being impacted and affected by the people around them. This might not involve church leaders getting physically dirty, however, the phrase 'get your hands dirty' would be equally applicable here. The expectation was that the priests should be active in ordinary, everyday things, not just looking on or observing others.

Both these scenarios give us a perspective on how God would have us use our power. First, this is about humility – there is no task that is beneath someone in the church. From washing the dishes to clearing the drains, everyone should be willing and active in every aspect of church life, including the difficult and dirty tasks.

Second, this is about who the shepherd is actively seeking out. The shepherd is not looking for the best or most worthy sheep, rather, the shepherd is seeking the lost, the injured and the weak. God searches for those who have no power in society and actively rebukes those who have power and misuse it (as we see in Ezekiel 34:20-22 where God talks of sheep who pushed and butted and scattered the weak animals and God's judgment on those powerful sheep). God wants us to be people who seek out those in need and bring them safely into the fold. How can we all 'smell of the sheep' as we actively seek to play our part with humility?