

- On our recent parish pilgrimage, our group was able to pray at the tombs of many well-known saints. While I prayed for the election of a godly pope at each saint's tomb, I especially prayed for this at the tombs of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine.
- Sts. Ambrose and Augustine are two of the greatest shepherds our Church has ever known: men of profound learning and eloquence, men with backbone not afraid of confrontation, and yet men with the tender heart of a pastor.
- Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and our readings emphasize the importance of following Christ, who is both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world.
- Our readings encourage us to be obedient to Christ, to listen to His voice and follow Him, and to persevere in the face of the hardships that naturally come with Christian discipleship.
- Indeed, in our Gospel we are called to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, Who lovingly calls His sheep to Himself – which is a way of telling us that we must be obedient to Christ and all that He teaches us through His Church.
- In short, our lives as Christians must be rooted in a humble obedience, doing all that we can to avoid sin, while striving to grow in virtue, so that we might become more like Christ.
- But we must also be united to Christ. If we wish to be saved, then we must remain with Jesus by remaining within the safe pastures of His Body, the Church. To be a follower of Christ, we must be united to His one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church.
- So, we must entrust ourselves to this Good Shepherd, following Him just as sheep follow the voice of their shepherd, for our salvation is only found in being one of the sheep of His flock.
- As we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, it's perhaps quite providential that we are also celebrating the fact that we now have a new shepherd for the Universal Church: Pope Leo XVI – an American!
- Since his election this past Thursday, pundits, wags, bloggers, and nearly every media outlet have rushed to make some type of statement or prediction about our new Holy Father and how he will lead our Church.
- My best advice is to stop trolling your social media accounts. And for goodness sakes, don't take your cues from Fox News or CNN. If you want to know about the holy father, then read his homilies and statements, and watch how he offers the Mass.
- Yet rather than spending all your energy on trying to figure out if the pope is going to be more like Pope Francis or more like Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict, put your energy into praying for the man that he can be a good shepherd.
- The pope is not a politician – at least he shouldn't be. While he is a head of state, he is first and foremost a shepherd and an apostle. His job is to be the Vicar of Christ: to lead us and the entire world to Christ. And to do this well, he needs our prayers.
- For those of us blessed to be already within the safe confines of the Church's pastures, the pope is our leader, our shepherd, and our guide. His role is to teach us the Faith, encourage us in our Christian witness, and challenge and inspire us to greater virtue.
- He is to show us the face of Christ, and strengthen us so that, we too, might show the face of Christ to all whom we meet.
- To those outside of the Church, the holy father is to be a bridge, which is what the word "pontiff" means. The pope is one who reaches out across the chasms created by a lack of

faith, a lack of hope, and a lack of charity – or even a lack of understanding – creating a means for those who do not know Christ to access Him.

- I remember quite vividly growing up with Pope John Paul II as pope. Even though I wasn't yet a Catholic, I still looked to him as a Christian leader and felt a certain connection to him.
- Pope St. John Paul II was a great inspiration to me in my high school and college years, and I always had an admiration for him, even when I didn't think so highly of Catholicism.
- When I began to investigate and study Catholicism, Pope John Paul II's example and Christian witness made Catholicism all the more attractive to me. And certainly once I became Catholic, I was even more nourished and encouraged by his words and actions.
- As a seminarian and young priest, whenever Pope John Paul II published something, I eagerly read it to take in his words of wisdom.
- We must pray for Pope Leo that he can be the same way. So many in our world today find Christianity absurd, stupid, and even dangerous. Catholicism is as mocked and vilified as ever. And yet there is no salvation outside of the Church.
- There is no salvation outside of Christ. And so one's choice for or against Jesus Christ and His Church is the most fundamental choice each person must make in this life, whether they know it or not.
- God created us to love Him, yet there is no true love without the freedom to choose. Thus, our Lord gave us this capacity to choose: our free will. This capacity to choose for or against God is nothing less than the capacity to determine our eternal destiny.
- To choose well, all of us must fight against the spirit of this world, which constantly encourages us to rebel against the ways of God and to devote ourselves more fully to the false consolations of mammon. At times we must even fight the devil himself.
- But our good Lord does not leave us alone in this fight! He is our good shepherd, and He lays down His life for His sheep.
- What's more, Christ has given us His Church, which safeguards His authentic teachings and provides us the grace of the sacraments, which strengthen us and conform us ever more closely to Him.
- And now, at this moment in history, our Lord has given us a new Supreme Shepherd for His Church: Pope Leo XIV. While we may naturally look for clues to what his pontificate will hold and what his leadership will be like, what's most important is that we pray for him.
- We must pray that Pope Leo will be a strong, wise, and godly pope: a man with courage, faith, and integrity – as well as the strength of character necessary to navigate the complexities of the Church at this time.
- We must pray that he will be a man willing to suffer all that's necessary to lead our Church as Christ Himself would without counting the cost: that he can be a good, virtuous, and courageous shepherd after the model of Christ the Good Shepherd.
- Lastly, we must keep our eyes on the prize, which is Heaven, praying that someday we may be counted amongst that blessed multitude who *stand before God's throne and worship Him day and night in His temple*, as our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading states.
- And as we honor and celebrate our mothers this weekend, may we always have recourse to our Most Blessed Mother, trusting that she who is the Mediatrix of All Graces, will give Pope Leo every grace he needs to lead our Church and the world toward Christ her Son.
- St. Ambrose, pray for us. St. Augustine, pray for us. Pope St. John Paul II, pray for us.