

An engaged couple gets the following piece of advice from a priest I know: "Remember, you're not just marrying that person; you're marrying the person that person is going to be." His point is "People change," and to say "I do" is to say "I intend to remain faithful to this person through our growth and maturity."

Parents and children never say "I do", but they too commit to remaining faithful by the experience of childbirth and family life. Mother's Day is a reminder of the faithful relationship between parents and children. But for many it's a reminder of misunderstandings. Typically, teenagers don't understand their parents, and often adults don't understand their parents. We get used to our parents' behavior, and then they may do something unpredictable, and it places stress on one's ability to remain faithful.

Sheep, then, have an enviable position. They stay in the fold with the shepherd. They recognize the shepherd's voice and can distinguish it from the voice of a thief. Following the leader they stay secure in the sheepfold. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is a model of fidelity.

The quest for fidelity conjures up two conflicting images in my mind, both from the media. The first is Gary Hart. Hart's downfall is complicated by two unresolved questions: Was he innocent? And was the press justified in spying on him? We don't need to accuse anyone of guilt here, but what was interesting to me was this: What made Gary Hart's downfall possible was the perception that the American public demands faithful relationships.

Now, contrast that with the image of fidelity in the media. The plots of movies and tv serials--even commercials--condone the very actions Hart is accused of. What interests me is this: What makes such programs and commercials successful is the perception that the American public tolerates unfaithful relationships.

Now, you don't have to be a sheep to know we hear many voices; sometimes the voice is the voice of the master, sometimes it is the voice of the thief. But maybe you do have to be a sheep to know which is which. We know who is the Good Shepherd, now who is the good sheep?

Quite simply, the good sheep is one who enjoys the sheepfold, one who lives and plays with the other sheep who love the same shepherd. They do not fear to go in and out of the gate, even to graze in dangerous places, because their ears are attuned to the voice of the shepherd.

Families are like sheepfolds. They thrive because they are bonded in love. Sometimes they are threatened from within because people change; sometimes families graze in dangerous places, sometimes people are hurt. We may feel insecure because others grow and mature. It is then that the Good Shepherd will help us with our intent to remain faithful. The challenge to the Christian family is to keep its ears attuned to the voice of the Shepherd, Jesus, the model of fidelity. If we ever fail, he remains faithful so that we remain in his love.