

Confirmands, you're making a huge commitment today. You are standing here before God and His Church saying that you believe in Jesus and will believe until your last breath. You are promising never to jump ship from the boat of the Church; you are swearing never to take allegiance with the devil; you are professing before all these people and anyone who may be out there online that this is what you believe and what you will believe until your dying day, no matter what suffering occurs, no matter what temptations may arise, no matter what the evil one may throw at you.

You are saying, in the words of our Gospel reading, that Jesus is your shepherd and you are His sheep, that you'll trust no other and that you'll follow no other all the days of your life.

These seem like huge promises to make—because they are. They seem like outrageously long-standing promises to make, especially for people of your age—because they are. You are speaking today about sticking with Jesus your Shepherd without knowing what the future holds. The fact is, you are going to be tempted by other religions, and likely by the all-prevalent “no religion” of the day; you are going to find yourself doubting God because of all the evil in the world, whether that be suffering you yourself are experiencing, or that a loved one is enduring, or that you are seeing all over the news; you are going to find yourself distracted by life, by relationships and school and work and your favourite hobbies and so following Jesus can easily become one of the things that just gets left to the side. All of these obstacles are going to try and wedge themselves between you and your faith, between you and your Lord, but here and now you are committing not to let anything separate you from the love of God.

Which is an absolutely absurd commitment to make. Not because it's you 5 making this vow. No, if any of us, even the people that have been Christians here for 80 or so years, even the pastors, if any of us got up here and said “yup, I promise you I'll be a Christian until the day I die—you better believe it!” it would be a promise that we are unable to keep, or at least be sure that we will keep.

But that's because we are the sheep. We are the ones who need the care, we are the ones who need the guidance to the water and the pastures where we can eat. We are the ones who are helpless when the roaming and ravenous wolf comes about, looking for his midday, or midnight snack.

So you and I can make these promises to hear the Shepherd's voice, to know it and follow wherever He goes—and the longer you hear it, the more days you are here in His fold and listening to His voice you will become more accustomed to it and thus follow it easier and more joyfully—but your success in staying in God's flock, His people He calls His Church, is not based on how confident you make today's promises, but on how certain and how persistent His love is for you.

Your shepherd knows you, inside and out, left side, right side, up and down. He knows your strengths and your weaknesses. He knows the ways you love best and He knows the things that tempt you easiest. So it is no surprise on the days when you begin wandering, your head down and distracted by this other little path, your feet taking one step at a time until you've found yourself lost and alone and helpless. He knows you well enough to have been there with you the entire time even if you were oblivious to it! And even if you could manage to run off without Him noticing (which you can't), He not only knows you perfectly, but He loves you perfectly as well.

The same good Shepherd who knows you is also the One who doesn't run away when taking care of you gets difficult. He doesn't throw His hands up in frustration when you've messed up again; He doesn't get tired, even if He had to be out there all week long looking for you after you got stuck in the wrong place. No your Shepherd loves you so truly and perfectly that even when the wolf comes looking for his next meal He doesn't run but instead He fights.

But in this fight, His love is shown to be even truer because the cost to Him is not a scratch or a broken bone; knowing what it takes to save you eternally, He is willing, fully ready to lay down His life for you. There is nothing that He is unwilling to do to care for you sheep—for all of you sheep.

Now, a dead shepherd isn't much help to His flock. If any other shepherd were to die fighting for his sheep they would be left helpless for the next storm to scatter them or the next wolf to pick them off one by one, but your Shepherd, the true and good Shepherd, He has received authority from His God and your God to take back up His life again.

Which means that His knowledge and His care of you, His sacrificial love now complete, none of it ends.

So everything you mentioned in your speeches—that God hears your prayers, that He guides you each day, that He is there to forgive you, that He provides you all you need, these are true because Christ your Shepherd lives again in order to keep shepherding you even after He laid down His life for you.

This is who you are committing to today. It might sound like you are giving a lot when you say that you'll never forget about Jesus or never walk away from Him or deny Him, even if you are threatened by death, but the One you are committing to has already died for you, and He's already promised never to leave you or forget you or give up on you. So even on the days when your commitment feels shaky, or even after weeks of forgetting about your faith, or even if you end up getting mad at God for the way life is working out or you're doubting Him because of how evil the world seems and how strong the evil one seems, He isn't turning His back on you.

He never can and He never will, because you have been baptized into His family, because you have been forgiven, and because today you will kneel at this altar and receive His sacrifice of love for you. You can trust His commitment, His promise, His vow to you, even on the days when you can't trust your words to Him.

Your good Shepherd knows you and loves you and cares for you. Your Good Shepherd has already died in your place and is now living to watch over you all your days.