



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 9 May 1979

1. In the forty days which separate the Ascension of the Lord from Easter Sunday, the Church lives the paschal mystery, meditating on it in her liturgy, where it is reflected, it could be said, as in a prism. The figure of the *Good Shepherd* occupies a particular place in this liturgical contemplation. On the fourth Sunday of Easter we read again the allegory of the Good Shepherd, which St John has inscribed in the tenth chapter of his gospel.

The first words of this allegory explain already its paschal significance. Christ says: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). We know that these words were confirmed during his passion. Christ laid down his life on the cross. And he did so with love. Above all, he wished to respond to the love of the Father, who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Carrying out "this charge... received from my Father" (Jn 10:18) and revealing his love, *Jesus, too, felt, in a particular way, the Father's own love*. He affirms this in the same discourse, when he says: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again" (Jn 10:17). The sacrifice on Calvary is, above all, the giving of himself; it is the gift of his life, which, remaining in the power of the Father, is restored to the Son in a splendid new form. In this way, therefore, the Resurrection is the same *gift of life re-stored to the Son in return for his sacrifice*. Christ is aware of this, and he expresses it also in the allegory of the Good Shepherd: "No one takes it (that is, life) from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (Jn 10:18).

These words plainly refer to the Resurrection, and they express all the depth of the paschal mystery.

2. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because of the fact that he gives his life to the Father in this way: giving it back in sacrifice, he lays it down *for the sheep*.

Here we enter the field of a splendid and fascinating simile, already so dear to the Old Testament prophets. Here are the words of Ezekiel:

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down" (Ez 34:11, 15; cf. Jer 31:30).

Taking up this image again, Jesus revealed an aspect of the Good Shepherd's love that the Old Testament had not yet divined: to lay down one's life for the sheep.

As is known, Jesus often used parables in his teaching to make the divine truth which he proclaimed comprehensible to men who were generally simple and accustomed to think by means of images. The image of the Pastor and of the fold was familiar to the experience of his listeners, as it still is to the mind of modern man. Even if civilization and technique are progressing by leaps and bounds, this image, however, is still present in our state of affairs. The shepherds take the sheep to the pastures (as, for example, on the Polish mountains where I come from) and remain there with them during the summer. They accompany them from one pasture to another. They watch them so that they do not go astray, and in particular they defend them from wild animals; just as we hear in the Gospel account: "the wolf snatches them (the sheep) and scatters them" (cf. Jn. 10:1.2).

The Good Shepherd, according to Christ's words, is just he who, "*seeing the wolf come*", *does not flee, but is ready to risk his own life*, struggling with the beast of prey so that none of the sheep will be lost. If he were not ready to do so, he would not be worthy of the name of Good Shepherd. *He* would be a hireling, but not a shepherd.

This is Jesus' allegorical discourse. Its essential meaning lies precisely *in* this, that "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11); and this, in the context of the events of Holy Week, means that Jesus, dying on the cross, laid down his life for every man and for all men.

"He alone could do it; he alone could bear a whole world's weight, the load of a guilty world, the burden of man's sin, the accumulated debt, past, present, and to come; the sufferings which we owed but could not pay; 'in his own body on the tree of the cross' (1 Pet 2:24) 'through the eternal spirit offering himself without spot to God... to serve the living God' (Heb 9:14). Such was the deed of Christ, who gave his life for everyone: and therefore he is called the Good Shepherd" (Card. J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 16, London 1899, p. 235).

By means of the paschal sacrifice, all men became his fold—because he has ensured to each one

that divine and supernatural life which, since man's fall, owing to original sin, had been lost. He alone was able to restore it to man.

3. The allegory of the Good Shepherd and, in it, the image of the fold, are of fundamental importance to understand what the Church is and what tasks she has to carry out in the history of man. Not only must the Church be a "fold", but she must actualize this mystery, which is always being accomplished between Christ and man: the mystery of the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. This is what St Augustine says of her: "will he, who sought you first when you despised him instead of seeking him, despise you, O sheep, if you seek him? Begin, therefore, to seek him, the one who sought you first and carried you on his shoulders. Make his words come true: *The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice and follow me*" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps LXIX, 6).

The Church, which is the People of God, is, at the same time, a historical and social reality, in which this mystery is continually renewed and actualized in different ways. And different men have their active part in this *solicitude for the salvation of the world, for the sanctification of one's neighbour*, which is and does not cease to be the solicitude characteristic of the Crucified and Risen Christ. Such is certainly, for example, the solicitude of parents with regard to their children. What is more, it is the solicitude of every Christian, without any difference, with regard to his neighbour, the brothers and sisters that God puts on his way.

This pastoral solicitude is, of course, particularly the vocation of pastors—priests and bishops. And they in particular must fix their eyes on the figure of the Good Shepherd, meditate on all the words spoken by Christ, and measure their own life by them.

Let us permit St Augustine to speak once more: "If only good shepherds be not lacking! Far be it from us that they should be lacking, and far be it from divine mercy not to call them forth and establish them. It is certain that if there are good sheep, there are also good shepherds: in fact it is from good sheep that good shepherds are derived." (*Sermones ad populum*, Sermo XLIV, XIII, 30).

4. In accordance with the evangelical discourse on the Good Shepherd, the Church reconstructs every year in her own liturgy *the life and death of St Stanislaus*, Bishop of Krakow. His memory in the liturgical calendar of the Universal Church is celebrated on 11 April—the date of his death in 1079 at the hands of King Boleslas the Bold; in Poland, on the other hand, the feast of this principal Patron is traditionally celebrated on 8 May.

This year it is 900 years, nine centuries, since the moment in which—following the liturgical texts—we can repeat of him that he laid down his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10:11). And even if this death is so distant from us in time, it keeps the eloquence of a special testimony.

In the course of history my fellow citizens united spiritually round the figure of St Stanislaus, especially in difficult periods.

In the current year, a year of Great Jubilee, as the first Polish Pope, who until a short time ago was the successor of St Stanislaus in the episcopal see of Krakow, I wish to participate in the solemnity in honour of the Patron Saint of Poland.

Together with all those who celebrate this solemnity we wish to approach again Christ the Good Shepherd, who "lays down his life for the sheep", in order that he may be our strength for future centuries and for the new generations.

To the young people:

My greeting is now addressed to you young people, to you, pupils of elementary and secondary schools, present in such large numbers, to you, boys and girls who have received First Communion or Confirmation!

We are in the month of May, dedicated to Mary Most Holy.

On the night of 6 December 1876 Don Bosco in a dream saw Domenico Savio, who had recently died. The latter came to let Don Bosco know that he was in Paradise and offered him a bunch of flowers symbolizing the virtues practised in life.

At a certain moment Don Bosco asked him: "My dear Domenico, you who practised these noble virtues all your life, tell me: what consoled you most at the point of death?"

Domenico thought for a moment and then said: "What consoled me most at the point of death was the assistance of Mary, the Mother of Jesus! Tell that to the boys! Let them never forget to pray to her during their life!"

So, love Our Lady, dear young people and children! Pray to her every day! May the Blessed Virgin, invoked, loved and imitated, help you to remain good and happy in a holy way!

Before concluding the General Audience John Paul II referred to the anniversary of the tragic discovery of the lifeless body of the Hon. Aldo Moro in via Caetani.

A year ago the lifeless body of the Honourable Aldo Moro was found. The tragic conclusion of the shocking event aroused great emotion in Italy and in the world, as also a resounding protest

against the blind and irrational violence which, with the killing of the illustrious statesman, had humiliated humanity in its fundamental exigencies of truth and justice.

Today we raise a special prayer for him and for the members of his escort, savagely assassinated in cold blood, as well as for all those who in this year, and even in the last few days, have been victims of unspeakable brutality, which strips our millenary civilization of its human and Christian values. To acts of hatred we must all respond with the message of love, which Christ left us.

May all citizens, with their honest industry, be able to construct in serene and civil community life, a society in which each one may live his own rights fully.

At this point John Paul 11 interrupted his reading of the address, to refer to Paul VI's personal participation in the dramatic affair of the Italian statesman. Before concluding, the Holy Father said: "Perhaps we must think of all this in the context of today's discourse, in the context of the discourse of the Good Shepherd, and say to Christ: 'We offer you these victims for the peace of the world, for the victory of true justice. For the victory of love over hatred, we offer you these victims!' There is a force in this sacrifice which is very like that of Christ on the Cross".

©Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana