



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 16 May 1979

1. Today I wish to return once more to the image of the Good Shepherd. This image, as we said a week ago, is deeply rooted in the liturgy of the Easter period. And this is so because it was deeply impressed in the Church's consciousness, especially the Church of the first Christian generations. Among other things, the effigies of the Good Shepherd which come from that historical period, bear witness to this. Clearly, this image is an *extraordinary synthesis of the mystery of Christ* and, at the same time, of his mission which is always in progress. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11).

For us who constantly participate in the Eucharist, who obtain forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, for us who feel the constant solicitude of Christ for man, for the salvation of souls, for the dignity of the human person, for the uprightness and clarity of the earthly ways of human life, the image of the Good Shepherd is as eloquent as it was for the early Christians. These, *in the paintings in the catacombs*, representing Christ as the Good Shepherd, expressed the same faith, the same love and the same gratitude. And they expressed them in periods of persecution, when for avowing Christ they were threatened with death; when they were obliged to look for underground cemeteries to pray together and to take part in the Holy Mysteries. The catacombs of Rome and of the other cities of the ancient Empire continue to be an eloquent *testimony of man's right to profess faith in Christ* and to confess him publicly. They continue to be also the testimony of that *spiritual power* which springs from the Good Shepherd. He proved to be more powerful than the ancient Empire and the secret of this strength is truth and love, for which man always has the same hunger and with which he is never satiated.

2. "I am the good shepherd", Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (Jn 10:14-15). How marvellous this knowledge is! What knowledge! It reaches as far as eternal Truth and Love, the name of which is the "Father"! That

particular knowledge, which gives rise to sheer trust, comes precisely from this source. Mutual knowledge: "*I know... and they know*".

This is not abstract knowledge, a purely intellectual certainty, which is expressed in the sentence "I know everything about you". Such knowledge, in fact, arouses fear, it induces one, rather, to withdraw within oneself: "Do not touch my secrets, leave me alone." "*Malheur à la connaissance... qui ne tourne point à aimer!*" (Woe to the knowledge... which does not turn to loving!: Bossuet, *De la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même. Oeuvres Complètes*, Bar-le-Duc 1870, Guérin. (p. 86) Christ says, on the contrary: "I know my own", and he says it of *the liberating knowledge which brings forth trust*. For, although man defends access to his secrets; although he wants to keep them for himself, he has a still greater need, "he is hungry and thirsty" for Someone before whom he could open up, to whom he could manifest and reveal himself. Man is a person; *the need of secrecy and the need of revealing himself* belong at the same time to the "nature" of the person. Both these needs are closely united. One is explained by means of the other. Both together indicate, on the contrary, the need of Someone before whom man could reveal himself. Certainly, but even more he needs Someone *who could help man to enter his own mystery*. That "Someone" must, however, win absolute trust; he must, revealing himself, confirm that he is worthy of this trust. He must confirm and reveal that he is the Lord and, at the same time, the Servant of *man's interior mystery*.

Christ revealed himself precisely in this way. His words: "I know my own and my own know me" find a definitive confirmation in the words that follow: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (cf. Jn .10:1-15).

That is the interior profile of the Good Shepherd.

3. During the history of the Church and Christianity there has never been a lack of men *to follow Christ the Good Shepherd*. Certainly they are not lacking today either. More than once the liturgy refers to this allegory to present to us the figures of some saints when the day of their feast arrives in the liturgical calendar. Last Wednesday we recalled St Stanislaus, Patron Saint of Poland, whose ninth centenary we are celebrating this year. On the feast of this Bishop-Martyr we re-read the Gospel of the Good Shepherd.

Today I would like to refer to another personage, since *the 250th anniversary of his canonization* falls this year too. It is a question of the figure of St John Nepomucene. On this occasion, at the request of Cardinal Tomasek, Archbishop of Prague, I sent personally to him a special letter for the Church in Czechoslovakia.

Here are some sentences from this letter:

"The grand figure of St John has examples and gifts for everyone. History presents him to us first

as dedicated to study and to preparation for the priesthood. Aware as he was that, in the expression of St Paul, he would be changed into another Christ, he incarnates in himself the ideal of the expert of God's Mysteries, straining as he did for the perfection of virtues; that of the Parish Priest who sanctifies his faithful with the example of his life and with zeal for souls; and that of the Vicar-General as well, carrying out his duties punctiliously in the spirit of ecclesial obedience.

"In this office he found his martyrdom, for defending the rights and legitimate freedom of the Church against the wishes of King Wenceslas IV. The latter took part personally in his torture, then had him thrown from the bridge into the river Moldava.

"Some decades after the death of the man of God, the rumour spread that the King had had him killed because he had refused to violate the secrecy of Confession. And thus the martyr of ecclesiastical freedom was venerated also as a witness to the Sacramental seal.

"Since he was a priest, it seems natural that priests should be the first to drink at his fountain, to clothe themselves in his virtues, and be excellent shepherds. The good shepherd knows his sheep, their requirements, their needs. He helps them to extricate themselves from sin, to overcome the obstacles and difficulties with which they meet. Unlike the hireling, he goes in search of them, helps them to carry their weight, and always knows how to encourage them. He dresses their wounds and heals them with grace, especially through the sacrament of Reconciliation.

"In fact, the Pope, the Bishop, and the Priest do not live for themselves but for the faithful, just as parents live for their children and as Christ dedicated himself to service of his Apostles: 'The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt 20:28)."

4. Christ the Lord in his allegory of the Good Shepherd utters also the following words: "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold: I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn 10:16).

It can easily be guessed that Jesus Christ, speaking directly to the children of Israel, indicated the necessity of the spread of the Gospel and of the Church and, thanks to that, the extension of the solicitude of the good Shepherd beyond the limits of the People of the Old Covenant.

We know that this process began to be realized already in apostolic times; that it was constantly realized later and continues to be realized. We are aware of the *universal significance of the mystery of redemption* and also of the universal significance of the *mission of the Church*.

Therefore, concluding this meditation of ours today on the Good Shepherd, let us pray with special ardour for all those "other sheep" that Christ has still to lead to the unity of the fold (cf. Jn 10:16).

Perhaps they are those who do not yet know the Gospel. Or perhaps those who, for any reason, have abandoned it; perhaps, in fact, even those who have become its fiercest adversaries, the persecutors.

Let Christ take on his shoulders and press to him those who are not capable of returning alone.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. For them all.

Special greeting to a group of Christian Brothers:

Among the many people whom I would like to greet personally there is a group of Christian Brothers who are in Rome for a course of spiritual renewal. I want you and all your confrères to know of my profound esteem for your vocation on behalf of the Christian education and training of the young. But even more important than what you do is what you are: men who have generously accepted a call, Brothers who are totally consecrated to the Lord Jesus, and committed to his Church and to his Gospel. Your first criterion of success is your capacity to love—to love Jesus Christ, his Father and his brethren. Your deepest fulfilment is in holiness of life. The Pope is for you, and Christ is with you—today and always!

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