

"He is a shepherd for all of us"

In his 18 January general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about Jesus as the model for evangelization.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last Wednesday we began a cycle of catechesis on the passion of evangelization, on that apostolic zeal

that should enliven the Church and every Christian. Today, let us look at the unsurpassable model of evangelization: *Jesus*. The Christmas Gospel defines him as the “Word of God” (cf. *Jn 1:1*). The fact that he is the *Logos*, that is, the Word, highlights an essential aspect of Jesus: He is always in relation, outgoing, never isolated, always in relation, outgoing. The word, in fact, exists to be transmitted, communicated. So it is with Jesus, the Eternal Word of the Father, reaching out to us, communicated to us. Christ not only has words of life, but makes his life a Word, a message: that is, he lives always turned toward the Father and toward us. He is always looking at his Father who sent him and looking at us to whom he was sent.

Indeed, if we look at his days as described in the Gospels, we see that intimacy with his Father – prayer –

occupies first place. This is why Jesus gets up early, when it is still dark, and goes into deserted areas to pray (cf. *Mk* 1:35; *Lk* 4:42), to speak with his Father. He makes all of his decisions and most important choices after having prayed (cf. *Lk* 6:12; 9:18). Specifically, within this relationship, in prayer which connects him to the Father in the Spirit, Jesus discovers the meaning of his being human, of his existence in the world because he is on a mission to us, sent by the Father to us.

It is thus interesting to note the first public act that he accomplishes after the years of his hidden life in Nazareth. Jesus does not work a great wonder, he does not send an effective message, but he mingles with the people who were going to be baptized by John. In this way, he offers us the key by which he acts in the world: spending himself for sinners, he puts himself in solidarity

with us without distance, in a total sharing of life. In fact, speaking about his mission, he will say that he did not come “to be served, but to serve and give his own life” (cf. *Mk* 10:45). Every day after praying, Jesus dedicates his entire day to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and dedicates it to people, above all to the poorest and weakness, to the sinners and to the sick (cf. *Mk* 1:32-39). So, Jesus is in contact with the Father in prayer and then he is in contact with all the people through his mission, through catechesis, by teaching the path to the Kingdom of God.

Now, should we want to represent his style of life with an image, it would not be difficult for us to find it: Jesus himself offers it, we have heard it, speaking of himself as the *Good Shepherd*, the one, he says, who “lays down his life for the sheep” (*Jn* 10:11). This is Jesus. In reality, to be a

shepherd was not just a job, but it required time and a lot of dedication. It was a true and proper way of life: twenty-four hours a day, living with the flock, accompanying them to pasture, sleeping among the sheep, taking care of those who were weakest. In other words, Jesus does not do something for us, but he gives everything, he gives his life for us. He has a *pastoral heart* (cf. *Ez 34:15*). He is a shepherd for all of us.

Indeed, to sum up the action of the Church in one word, the specific term “pastoral” is used. And to evaluate our “pastoralness” we need to confront ourselves with the model, confront ourselves with Jesus the Good Shepherd. Above all, we can ask ourselves: do we imitate him, drinking from the wells of prayer so that our heart might be in harmony with his? Intimacy with Him is, as a beautiful volume by Abate Chautard suggested, “*the soul of every*

apostolate”. Jesus himself clearly said to his disciples, “Without me you can do nothing” (*Jn* 15:5). By staying with Jesus, we discover that his pastoral heart always beats for the person who is confused, lost, far away. And ours? How many times do we express our attitude about people who are a bit difficult or with whom we have a bit of difficulty: “But it’s their problem, let them work it out....” But Jesus never said this, never. He himself always went to meet all the marginalized, sinners. He was accused of this – of being with sinners so that he might bring God’s salvation precisely to them.

We have heard the parable of the lost sheep found in chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke (cf. vv. 4-7). Jesus speaks about the lost coin as well as about the prodigal son there. If we want to train our apostolic zeal, we should always have chapter 15 of Luke before our eyes. Read it often.

We can understand there what apostolic zeal is. There we discover that God does not remain contemplating the sheep pen, nor does he threaten them so they won't leave. Rather, if one leaves and gets lost, he does not abandon that sheep, but goes in search of it. He does not say, "You got up and left – it's your fault – that's your business!" His pastoral heart reacts in another way: the pastoral heart *suffers* and the pastoral heart *takes risks*. It *suffers*: yes, God suffers for those who leave and, while he mourns over them, he loves even more. The Lord suffers when we distance ourselves from his heart. He suffers for all who do not know the beauty of his love and the warmth of his embrace. But, in response to this suffering, he does not withdraw, rather he *takes a risk*. He leaves the ninety-nine sheep who are safe and ventures out for the lost one, thus doing something both risky and unreasonable, but consonant

with his pastoral heart which misses the one who left, the longing for someone who has gone away – this is something consistent in Jesus. And when we hear that someone has left the Church, what do we want to say? “Let them work it out?” No. Jesus teaches us to have nostalgia for those who have left. Jesus does not feel anger or resentment but pure longing for us. Jesus feels nostalgic for us and this is God’s zeal.

And I wonder – we, do we have similar sentiments? Perhaps we see those who have left the flock as adversaries or enemies. “And this person? Hasn’t he gone to the other side? She lost her faith.... They are going to hell...” and we are serene. When we meet them at school, at work, on the streets of our city, why don’t we think instead that we have a beautiful opportunity to witness to them the joy of a Father who loves them and has never forgotten them?

Not to proselytize, no! But that the Word of the Father might reach them so we can walk together. To evangelize is not to proselytize. To proselytize is something pagan, it is neither religious nor evangelical. There is a good word for those who have left the flock and we have the honour and the burden of being the ones to speak that word. Because *the Word, Jesus, asks this of us – to always draw near to everyone with an open heart because he is like that.* Perhaps we have been following and loving Jesus for some time and have never wondered if we share his feelings, if *we suffer and we take risks* in harmony with Jesus's heart, with this pastoral heart, close to Jesus's pastoral heart! This is not about proselytism, as I said, so that others become “one of us” – no, this is not Christian. It is about loving so that they might be happy children of God. In prayer, let us ask the grace of a pastoral heart, an open heart that

draws near to everyone, so as to bear the Lord's message as well as to feel Christ's longing for them. For without this love that suffers and takes risks, our lives do not go well. If we Christians do not have this love that suffers and takes risks, we risk pasturing only ourselves. Shepherds who are shepherds of themselves, instead of being shepherds of the flock, are people who comb "exquisite" sheep. We do not need to be shepherds of ourselves, but shepherds for everyone.

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