

Meditations: Sunday of the Fourth Week of Easter (Year B)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during this time of Easter. The topics are: Jesus is the good shepherd; giving his life for the sheep; we are all sheep and shepherds.

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THE GOSPELS of the first few Sundays Easter narrated the risen

Christ's appearances. Today, however, we read the discourse in which Jesus presents Himself as the good shepherd. He describes what characterizes someone who looks out for the sheep: attention, spirit of sacrifice, union with the Father, full freedom to take up the mission... And his words move his listeners to trust in Him and want to form part of his flock. Today, on Good Shepherd Sunday, the Church invites us to enter into the fold of the risen Christ, to let Him be our guide.

The liturgy of today's Mass begins with a prayer to God the Father that reminds us of our weakness: "Lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before."^[1] Jesus knows our situation and is aware that we need his healing strength. The wounds of sin need not lead to discouragement; they are a reason to trust more in

Jesus. He helps us see and understand reality and fix our sight more on God. Jesus has gone before us on the path to eternal life: He opens the path and shows us the way to happiness.

The light of Easter illuminates the figure of the good shepherd. Each of us can say that *Jesus is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters (Ps 23:1-2)* because He has conquered death and has returned to life. As a liturgical hymn reminds us, “after triumphing over hell, the Redeemer, risen, returns to heaven carrying his sheep on his shoulders.”^[2] We find all of humanity, and each of us, in that sheep.

I AM the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the

sheep (Jn 10:11). In these few words, Jesus tells us how to identify the good shepherd: he gives himself to care for the souls entrusted to him. That task is the most important thing for him. There is a close relationship between the good shepherd and the sheep under his care: he knows each of them individually, spends time among them, recognizes their bleating, the way they walk... The good shepherd never abandons his sheep because they are part of his life, while the “hireling,” who does not care for them as his own, takes minimal responsibility for their care.

Jesus tells us that He lays down his life for the sheep as an act of freedom and, therefore, of love: *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it 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 up again. I*

have received this command from my Father (Jn 10:17-18). Knowing that we are loved by a shepherd like this is an incredible source of hope. The Passion shows the extent of Jesus's love for us, and the Resurrection shows that it is worthwhile to allow ourselves to be won over by that love. In it, we find the strength, even now, to begin to live a new life. "My God," St. Josemaria prayed, "how easy it is to persevere when we know that You are the Good Shepherd, and that we — you and I... — are sheep belonging to your flock! For we know full well that the Good Shepherd gives his whole life for each one of his sheep."^[3]

As sheep in Christ's flock, we will find the places where He gives us life and go to them: moments of prayer each day, devotions marking the rhythm of our days, and, above all, the sacraments. We are renewed in divine life through them, and we can

say, with the psalmist, *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life (Ps 23:5-6).*

THE SUNDAY dedicated to the good shepherd is a good day to pray for the presence of the good shepherd's care in the Church. It is the sacred ministers' particular mission, but, in a way, all the baptized, identified with Christ, are called to shepherd others through their prayer, example, and advice. For this reason, St. Josemaria taught that we are all both sheep and shepherds.

If we want to be good shepherds, we need to imitate Jesus when He serves, heals, accompanies, listens, and, ultimately, when He freely gives

his life for others. “A go-between does his work and receives his payment (...). In contrast, a mediator forgets about himself to bring the parties together. He gives his life; he pays the price, through his life, through his fatigue, through his work, through many things.”^[4]

Others are not a means to achieve an end, not even a seemingly noble end. That is the hireling’s approach in the parable: he doesn’t care about the sheep, but about the profit he can make from them.

The good shepherd looks at each person with the gratuitous love of God, seeing the fundamental truth of their condition as sons or daughters of God, called to glory and to share his love. Thus the good shepherd serves others joyfully, and they respond with trust: they want to draw close to the shepherd who seeks their happiness. After all, the reward for this self-giving is

unending joy: *When the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away* (1 Pt 5:4).

^[1] Roman Missal, Collect, Fourth Sunday of Easter.

^[2] Hymn *Salve dies*.

^[3] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 319.

^[4] Pope Francis, Homily, 9-XII-2016.

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