



SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE

"I am the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd lay down his life for his sheep" (Jn. 10: 11).

The passage from the gospel of St. John helps us to understand that Jesus is "the" good shepherd, not simply "a" good shepherd, as others may be, but He is unique in character (Ps. 23; Zc. 13: 7; Heb. 13: 20; 1 Pt. 2: 25; 1 Pt. 5: 4). The Greek word *kalos*, translated "good," describes that which is noble, wholesome, good, and beautiful, in contrast to that which is wicked, mean, foul, and unlovely. It signifies not only that which is good inwardly character but also that which is attractive outwardly. It is an innate goodness. Therefore, in using the phrase "the good shepherd" Jesus is referencing His inherent goodness, His righteousness, and His beauty. As shepherd of the sheep, He is the one who protects, guides, and nurtures His flock.

To better understand the purpose of a shepherd during the times of Jesus, it is helpful to realize that sheep are utterly defenseless and totally dependent upon the shepherd. Sheep are always subject to danger and must always be under the watchful eye of the shepherd as they graze. David tells how he killed a lion and a bear while defending his father's flock as a shepherd boy (1 Sam. 17: 36). In fact, shepherds were frequently subjected to grave danger, sometimes even giving their lives to protect their sheep. Likewise, Jesus gave His life on the cross as "the Good Shepherd" for his own. He who would save others, though He had the power, did not choose to save Himself. *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"* (Mt. 20: 28). Through His willing sacrifice, the Lord made salvation possible for all who come to Him in faith. In proclaiming that He is the Good Shepherd, Jesus speaks of "laying down" His life for His sheep (Jn. 10: 15, 17-18).

The Old Testament often speaks of God as shepherd of his people, Israel. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want* (Ps. 23: 1). *"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!"* (Ps. 80: 1). *"We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture"* (Ps. 100: 3). The Messiah is also pictured as the shepherd of God's people: *"He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms"* (Is. 40: 11). Jesus says he is the *Good Shepherd* who will risk his life to seek out and save the stray sheep (Mt. 18: 12, Lk. 15: 4). He is the *"Shepherd and Guardian of our souls"* (1 Pt. 2: 25). Jesus made three promises to his followers. He promised them everlasting life. If they accept him and follow him, they will have the life of God in them. Jesus also promised them a life that would know no end. Death would not be the end but the beginning; they would know the glory of indestructible life. Jesus promised a life that was secure. Jesus said that nothing would snatch them out of his hand, not even sorrow and death, since he is everlasting life itself. Our lives are safe in his hands.

Cyril of Alexander, a 5th century church father comments on Jesus as our Good Shepherd: "He shows in what manner a shepherd may be proved good; and He teaches that he must be prepared to give up his life fighting in defense of his sheep, which was fulfilled in Christ. For man has departed from the love of God, and fallen into sin, and because of this was, I say, excluded from the divine abode of paradise, and when he was weakened by that disaster, he yielded to the devil tempting him to sin, and death following that sin he became the prey of fierce and ravenous wolves. But after Christ was announced as the True Shepherd of all men, *"He laid down his life for us"* (1 Jn. 3: 6), fighting for us against that pack of inhuman beasts. He bore the Cross for us, that by His own death he might destroy death. He was condemned for us, that He might deliver all of us from the sentence of punishment: the tyranny of sin being overthrown by our faith: fastening to the Cross the decree that stood against us, as

it is written (Col. 2: 14). Therefore as the father of sin had as it were shut up the sheep in hell, giving them to death to feed on, as it is written in the psalms (Ps. 48: 16), He died for us as truly Good, and truly our Shepherd, so that the dark shadow of death driven away He might join us to the company of the blessed in heaven; and in exchange for abodes that lie far in the depths of the pit, and in the hidden places of the sea, grant us mansions in His Father's House above. Because of this he says to us in another place: *"Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you a kingdom"* (Luke 12:32). Do you listen attentively to the voice of the Good Shepherd and obey his word?

Do you know the peace and security of a life fully submitted to Christ? His life on earth was indeed a self-sacrificing love for each one of us. Reading through this line, it caught my eyes to notice a single "sheep" which St. John speak of. Each of us can place herself in this character as a sheep.

It is out of love He has desired to form me in his mind. He created me. He has been walking and will walk with me throughout the years of my life. He wants me to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him and to be happy with Him in the next. That's a fundamental knowledge of my being in the world. He give his life for me to save me from death, eternal damnation, and further more he give his life for me in the Sacrament of the Altar, the Holy Eucharist, that I may be fed, nurtured and grow intimately with him each moment of my life on earth, and not only giving his own body and blood for my food, he stay with me until the end of time, assured us through his holy words in the Gospel of St. Mt. 28: 20 *"I am with you always to the close of the age"* Remain in the tabernacle day and night for love of me.

For many it is difficult to believe in Jesus and to understand His teaching. We can see in the Gospel, how many times on different occasions, the Pharisees, the Elders put obstacles and questions which come from their blindness and stubbornness of hearts, even some of his followers have left and went their own ways. Looking to his disciples, he said to the twelve: "Do you also want to go away? Lord to whom shall we go?" Reply St. Peter, "You have the Words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy one of God."

What about our reactions? Thanks to the witness of our great Apostle, St. Peter, and so come down to us those who have lived their lives as witness to the world. So are we. Yes, we follow Jesus. With his grace, we believe, we know and we understand. We know and believe that Jesus is present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar to be our food in the Holy communion, for he is our good Shepherd which each one of us can testify to the world how and what each soul has encountered and expedient His presence in our daily lives. Perhaps he has called us, waited for us long time ago, many years ago... (base on MTL Rome, 19 April 1904).

Signs of his presence with us

- Perhaps he has been whispering to our hearts, with his gentle voice to follow him in order to response to his inspiration at the moment of difficulties, when our hearts are restless, struggling with frustrations and limitations; when we are in doubts of somethings;
- when we see only trials, our hearts are closed to see his loving gaze, to touch his caress, to smell the fragrant of his presence around us at that very moment; to eat and savor the sweetness of his very self, in order to open my heart to hear his voice...
- Perhaps we look and contemplate his love and gentle gaze with an attitude of thanksgiving for all the graces, favors he has bestowed upon us, and with eager, generous hearts to respond to his invitation to follow him.
- When we have accomplished the tasks of any duties, our hearts will rejoice then would we kneel down with humble heart giving thanks and praise to God for inviting us to cooperate in His and to glorify his Name.

- When we fall and life becomes a burden, we get tired and bored, we should not become sad or dishearten or discontent, but we should get up and run to God, who is always there at our side to guide us and give us strength and courage to fight a good fight.

Lord Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd who keeps watch over our lives. May I be ever attentive to your voice and submit fully to your wise rule for my life. Draw me near to you that I may always find peace and joy in your presence.

Mary our Model

It was Pope Paul VI who declared Mary the Mother of the Church at the close of the Second Vatican Council and he also published the great Encyclical on the Holy Eucharist "*Mysterium Fidei*". On the last page of that Encyclical he wrote this beautiful tribute to our Blessed Mother showing the unbroken link that exists between her and Christ, who is physically present in the Eucharist: He wrote: "*May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary from whom Christ Our Lord took the flesh which under the species of bread and wine 'in contained, offered and consumed,' may all the saints of God, especially those who burned with a more ardent devotion to the Divine Eucharist, intercede before the Father of mercies so that from this same faith in and devotion toward the Eucharist may result and flourish a perfect unity of communion among all Christians.*"

When we face the challenges, Mother Foundress, blessed Mary Theresa Ledochowska encourages us to go to our Lady Mother of Good Counsel for help. As we read about her life, which unfolded countless difficulties and obstacles, she invoked our Blessed Mother Mary for help and she never been unheard. With great devotion and filial love toward a Mother, Mary Therese reassured us, her daughters that Mary will not ever abandon us. She will bring us closer to Jesus. As she wrote in her Allocution in the "*Breve Apostolico*" on 10 June 1904.

"What then does Mary advise us? Let's look at a picture of the Mother of Good Counsel... does whatever He tells you" She receives the wisdom from Baby Jesus himself; what therefore will she counsel us? Without doubt, directing us to what is more perfect. Mary counsels us and her counsel awakens the spirit of sacrifice, a true spirit of sacrifice deeply rooted in the faith, which does not seek either recognition or earthly reward, instead, despite human wisdom, does well indeed to the poor, while others who hold themselves good, refuse to give in charity (Conference on 5 Mar 1912, from Listen Sisters).

Mary Theresa discovered in Our Lady her strength comes from the on-going fidelity to the Will of God even to the most piercing pain which we can contemplate her under the title of Our Lady of Sorrow. *"We look at Mary, who standing under the Cross, in her most bitter sorrows accomplishes her greatest sacrifice, without thinking, even for a minute, to desist and to withdraw. No, she remained until the last breath of Jesus, until she saw Him repose on her lap. If then we look at Jesus as our Model, what do we see? He bears voluntarily the suffering and death, thus showing as St. John writes, that He loved His own until the end"* (Allocution of the First Friday of April 1914).

Self-sacrificing in the missionary work

In tune with the words from the 1 Pt. 1: 18-19, *"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect"*, Blessed Mary Theresa in her plan for the foundation of the Congregation, offered to the laity the possibility of belonging to the Religious Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St. Peter Claver as Associate Members. (Art. 1: 1) With great zeal and burning fire within her, she exhorts them: *"You can contribute to a work of salvation, only for love of God, the Church and souls"* (MTL to Extern Member, 1909).

It springs up from her zeal and self-sacrificing for souls – she wanted all be saved especially in Africa. She used all the means, to let the world knows there are many souls to save for they are loved and redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, which is so precious. And Jesus has entrusted to each one of us and laity of all walks of life to cooperate with him in saving souls. Let not his blood be poured out in vain.

In her writing on the Sodality Mary Theresa wrote: *“The life of a sodal is a life of sacrifice, but must be a glorious life of sacrifice. The sodal, to follow her dear vocation, offers all: liberty, family, country and even the consolation of seeing the fruits of her hidden life and work. She, in fact, does not see the children whom the missionary fosters, with her help have baptized and converted, she does not see the sick cured at the mission, nor the hungry nourished, nor the nude dressed. She does not contemplate with Mary the happy faces of the guests at Cana, but stays alone with Mary at the foot of the Cross and looks with faith on the flow of blood of the Savior, whose merits should be applied to Africa. The sodal does not go to Africa, not because she lacks courage and generosity, no truly, but because she recognizes that it is more useful that someone remains here in Europe, to do the work of a blockhead, to advantage of the missionaries in Africa. The missionaries and the missionary sisters resemble a beautiful date-palm, whose fruit are baptized children, but whose roots are found below the earth, and although no one notices them, from them the tree draws the living water. They are the sodal with their hidden and uninterrupted work”* (MTL, 2 Feb 1898).

One of the examples in the conference given to our Extern Members in March 2022. One Franciscan priest who studied the Canon Law in the last year for Doctorate was asked by his Provincial to stop the study and take up the Parish as a new assignment. Father was at first very upset, questioning within his mind and heart how he could ask me such a thing? It took me so much time and energy for study to this point and just quit? One of his fellow classmates told him: remember, you have a vow of obedience. That voice was a turning point of his life. He pondered. He reflected. He came to accept the task with joy and surrender. Now he became a great preacher, holy pastor and caring confessor for his flock. Once he understood and learned the obedience of Jesus to the Will of The Father, even to the death, death on the cross, it is the greatest love he can express unreservedly and unconditionally. We, like the sheep, are defenseless and totally dependent upon the Shepherd. We are a subject to danger and must always be under the watchful eye of the Shepherd on our earthly pilgrimage.

Conclusion

In closing this reflection, let us ponder on the words of our Mother Foundress as she desired us to follow Jesus with undivided heart, with total dedication which is self-sacrificing Love for God and souls. *“The splendid example of this total dedication we have in Jesus Himself. From the crib to the cross He sacrificed Himself and continues to do so now in the Holy Eucharist... It is a sacrifice, which we can and must renew to the Lord every day”* (MTL Ascetical conferences to the Sisters, 6 April 1905).

Sr. Anna Dinh

St. Paul, 15 march 2022