

25. April 2021

**“The shepherds must be vigilant”**

*Jn 10:11-18*

*I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and runs away, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; he runs away because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd. The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as I have power to lay it down, so I have power to take it up again; and this is the command I have received from my Father.*

Although we may not see many flocks of sheep with their shepherds nowadays, we are very familiar with the image of the Good Shepherd. We know it well from Jesus Himself, and also from those people who, in Him, bear responsibility for the good of the faithful.

The Good Shepherd is the prototype of protection and security for God's flock, because he gives his life for the sheep and does not run away when he sees the wolf coming. For he loves his sheep and, if we refer to Jesus as the Good Shepherd, they belong to Him.

Those who are entrusted with a ministry as shepherds represent the Lord and are also called to lay down their lives for the flock, which is the Lord's property. Thank God, we have many examples of such shepherds.

On the other hand, those whom the Lord calls “hired men” act differently. They do what they have to do, but they do not take inner responsibility for the flock and therefore do not pay attention to the dangers that could threaten the sheep. When the wolf comes, they make themselves safe. They have not established with the flock a bond of love, which goes beyond their own interests. They do not care more for the good of the other person than for their own good.

Only in God can we find the full security of knowing that we are protected by the Good Shepherd. Men, no matter how good their intentions, can falter. The Lord wants us to be aware of this, because it is simply the truth, to which we must fully awaken:

*“No one is good but God alone”* - Jesus tells us (*Mk 10:18*), certainly referring to the fact that no one can be good by himself. Only God is goodness itself! But the more we live in God, the more we allow ourselves to be moved by Him, the more His goodness will grow in us, so that we will become good in Him. But with the limitation that we can only remain good if we remain in Him.

While the Pope, bishops and priests are the first to be entrusted with the service of shepherds, they are not the only ones. They must protect the flock above all from false doctrines and recognise, in the spirit of discernment, where the wolf is infiltrating in order to confuse the flock, for the consequence of false doctrines is the scattering of the flock! This does not only apply to those teachings and tendencies that come from outside and want to penetrate the Church; but the vigilance of pastors is especially necessary to identify and counteract errors within the Church. St. Paul is a good example for us in this, since he opposed any alteration of doctrine (*cf. e.g. Gal 1:6-9*).

Apart from counteracting erroneous doctrines, pastors must always proclaim the faith clearly and must be aware that their every remark or comment, whether official or unofficial, will have an impact on the faithful and on the whole world, because of the wide spreading of modern media.

If it should happen - God forbid - that pastors do not fulfil their mission properly or that they themselves fall into error, as was the case during the Arian crisis, then it would be important for the faithful, with their sense of the faith, to take on “shepherding tasks”, so to speak, by bearing witness to the authentic faith and pointing out errors.

As Jesus said, there must be one flock under one shepherd. What does this mean?

As Catholics we can point out that the fullness of truth is present in the Catholic Church, even if it is not always fully awakened. Will all believers come to the Catholic Church? Is that God's plan?

We are called to pray for Christian unity and to give authentic witness to our faith. The more the Church shines in holiness and preserves purity of doctrine and praxis, if the liturgy is not trivialised and vocations to religious life are appreciated; if she maintains the necessary distance from the world, while being able to proclaim the Gospel convincingly to it, the more she will attract those who seek the fullness of truth.

When the time is right, the Holy Spirit will let us know how the Lord will finally bring to fulfilment that statement that *“there will be only one flock, one shepherd.”*

On the other hand, a striving for unification that neglects fundamental truths and instead introduces human concepts is misleading.

Only Jesus, the Good Shepherd, can be the deepest foundation of true unity among people. In His Church, He has entrusted to us the treasure of faith in its fullness. Therefore, all wolves who want to enter the flock or who have already entered it, must be driven away. Perhaps in their blindness some wolves even consider themselves to be good shepherds and do not realise the poison they bring and pass on. Therefore, much vigilance and prayer is required, so that those who spread error will wake up, and so that the shepherds, who are called to protect the flock, will fearlessly assume their responsibility.