

18. July 2021

“The True Shepherd of the Nations”

Jer 23:1-6

'Disaster for the shepherds who lose and scatter the sheep of my pasture, Yahweh declares. This, therefore, is what Yahweh, God of Israel, says about the shepherds who shepherd my people, "You have scattered my flock, you have driven them away and have not taken care of them. Right, I shall take care of you for your misdeeds, Yahweh declares! But the remnant of my flock I myself shall gather from all the countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; they will be fruitful and increase in numbers. For them I shall raise up shepherds to shepherd them and pasture them. No fear, no terror for them any more; not one shall be lost, Yahweh declares! Look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall raise an upright Branch for David; he will reign as king and be wise, doing what is just and upright in the country. In his days Judah will triumph and Israel live in safety. And this is the name he will be called, 'Yahweh-is-our-Saving-Justice.'

The shepherds have a great responsibility in the eyes of the Lord. They become God's representatives to men, and He provides them with everything necessary for this. Therefore, they will be accountable to God if they neglect their flock or flee when they see the wolf coming (cf. Jn 10:12). In the Book of Ezekiel we hear these words:

“Since my flock has been pillaged and for lack of a shepherd is now the prey of every wild animal, since my shepherds have ceased to bother about my flock, since my shepherds feed themselves rather than my flock, very well, shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: The Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I am against the shepherds. I shall take my flock out of their charge and henceforth not allow them to feed my flock. And the shepherds will stop feeding themselves, because I shall rescue my sheep from their mouths to stop them from being food for them.” (Ez 34:8-10)

The responsibility of the shepherds is heavy, for to whom much is entrusted, much will be required (Lk 12:48). However, this is not to be understood as an unbearable burden, because the Lord grants the grace to carry out such a responsible ministry. It is a great honour to be able to serve God in this way! God's appointed pastors can see themselves as close co-workers of God. Moreover, they are eminently involved in and carry on the mission of the Lord Himself. They are called to feed and protect the sheep.

When we think of shepherds in the context of the Church, the first thing that comes to mind are the representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The bishops, as successors of the Apostles, are entrusted with the faithful. What can the latter expect from their pastors?

In the first place, that the Word of God and all that it teaches be passed on to them pure and unadulterated. This is the daily spiritual bread, which must not be interpreted according to one's own ideas. The soul of the faithful longs for the right Word and right doctrine, which strengthens faith in God and also instructs how to serve Him better. Pastors must always bear in mind that the adulterated Word of God is like poison, which corrupts the food. Therefore, they must be careful that neither they themselves nor any of their priests deviate from the truth even in the slightest degree. The faithful must be given the nourishing bread!

The faithful are nourished by the sacraments. Especially the worthy celebration of Holy Mass with the reception of communion is a gift and strength for the soul. The liturgy must not be allowed to be disfigured by elements that do not belong to it. Otherwise, mould will creep into the good bread.

Pastors are also entrusted with the function of guardians, to point out and oppose tendencies that are alien and hostile to the faith. They must be able to identify the wolves and resist them. For this, they need a clear discernment of the spirits.

Moreover, their conduct must be exemplary and their faith strong, thus giving a fatherly assurance to their priests and faithful.

These are undoubtedly high demands, and it may seem that too much is being asked of them, even though pastors called by God are weak people, not gods. However, what is decisive is that they live in intimate union with the Lord, and that from this their service will grow and bear fruit.

If, on the other hand, they give themselves to the world and do not want to be a sign of contradiction, then they no longer draw directly from the source, i.e. from the Good Shepherd. In the image of Him - of Jesus - they must allow themselves to be moulded by the Holy Spirit. If this does not happen, they will be in great danger: their spirit of discernment will be clouded, they will lose sight of what is truly important for the flock, they will adopt the mentality of this world... If there is no conversion, this Word of the Lord in the Book of Ezekiel is presented to them as an unequivocal warning: *"I am against the shepherds. I shall take my flock out of their charge and henceforth not allow them to feed my flock. And the shepherds will stop feeding themselves, because I shall rescue my sheep from their mouths to stop them from being food for them."*

If the faithful suffer under the cross of having bad shepherds, their consolation will be the certainty that God Himself is the true Shepherd of all men. He does not change and His promise remains ever valid:

“I myself shall gather from all the countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; they will be fruitful and increase in numbers. For them I shall raise up shepherds to shepherd them and pasture them. No fear, no terror for them any more; not one shall be lost, Yahweh declares!”

Even the heavy burden of having bad shepherds can be turned by God into a blessing for the faithful, binding them even more deeply to the true Shepherd, who will never forsake them. However, we must never falter in our prayer for the shepherds who are in danger.