



27. February 2023

LENTEN ITINERARY

Day 6: "Shepherds for the sheep"

The reading read today at the Traditional Mass (Ez 34:11-16) is preceded by the Lord's accusation against the shepherds of Israel: *"For lack of a shepherd they have been scattered, to become the prey of all the wild animals; they have been scattered."* (v. 5). There were no shepherds left to tend the flock. Those who had been appointed only shepherded themselves (v. 8).

In this context, the Lord says in today's reading:

"Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it. (...) I shall feed them in good pasturage (...) I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the injured and make the sick strong (...) I shall be a true shepherd to them" (Ez 34:11,14,16).

Especially in times when those who have been called to feed God's flock fail in their mission, the Lord shows Himself to be the Good Shepherd. However tragic this situation may be, God does not let His people languish and guides them in His ways.

This is an essential message for our Lenten journey. In these troubled times there are few shepherds left to give us much needed clear guidance. Wolves, on the other hand, abound.

Given this situation, it becomes all the more important to realise that the Lord Himself guides us and does not let His flock succumb. At the same time, God shows us how a good shepherd acts.

Today's Gospel presents us with the Last Judgement. In connection with the theme of the shepherd, we could let these texts challenge us, asking ourselves whether we too have been good shepherds.

Everything the Lord mentions in the Judgement (Mt 25:31-46) is part of the service of a good shepherd: feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the imprisoned... These are what we call the "deeds of

mercy". We are presented with many opportunities to be "shepherds" of our neighbour. We must carefully fulfil this task, because our faith demands a concrete application in earthly realities.

Together with the Lord, we can do so much good in this world, knowing that He delights in it. The ministry of the pastor is not limited to those tasks that fall to those who have been specifically instituted by God, but is also fruitfully deployed in small ways. In this case, "shepherding" means to be attentive to the other person, to perceive the needs that distress him and to see if he needs our help.

This refers not only to the corporal deeds of mercy, but also to the seven spiritual works of mercy:

1. Counseling the doubtful
2. Instructing the ignorant
3. Admonishing the sinner
4. Comforting the sorrowful
5. Forgiving injuries
6. Bearing wrongs patiently
7. Praying for the living and the dead

Practising these works of mercy is a noble and meaningful way of exercising the ministry of pastor. This will make our "Lenten journey" very concrete and authentic.

In this context, I would like to point out a special and essential aspect, which is even a pastoral service for all mankind. I am referring to atonement. We see so much injustice in the world, we see how people offend God with their way of living, we see how they harm other people, we see how they spend their God-given lives without finding their deepest meaning, we see the terrible crime of abortion and so much more...

In general, we cannot prevent this from happening, but we can offer the Lord our sincere path of conversion as atonement. In a sense, we make up for some of the imbalance on behalf of mankind; we make reparation and can mitigate or even prevent the consequences of their evil deeds from befalling people. Every act of love is of great value before God, and true atonement is an act of love for God and mankind.

It is a great pastoral service to humanity! Often people do not know what they are doing and are not aware of the consequences of sin, separating us from God and bringing misfortune upon us.

Atonement, on the other hand, is to intercede before our Heavenly Father for mankind, asking Him to accept our love as reparation.

Today I would like to ask that, if possible, all those who are following this "Lenten itinerary" pray once the fifth sorrowful mystery or a penitential psalm, offering it for the conversion of the Jewish people. The reason for asking you to do this is that on February 2nd the statue of Christ at the second station of the Way of the Cross in Jerusalem was desecrated by a Jewish extremist. It is the very place where our Lord took upon His shoulders the cross.

Let us go forward on our Lenten journey and learn more and more to be shepherds of people, as the Lord asks us to be. He will reward us, love will grow and we will become more like Him, so that when the Lord sits on His glorious throne, surrounded by all the angels, He can say to us: *"Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world"* (Mt 25:34).