



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF SAINT ANTHONY OF PADUA

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

6 May 1979

Beloved Brothers and Sisters!

Today, in the whole of the Catholic Church, the Day for priestly and religious Vocations is being observed. I am happy to keep it with you, here in Rome, in the centre of Christianity, and in your parish entrusted to the priests of the Congregation of "Rogationists", whom I greet cordially.

This Sunday has been dedicated to this supreme and essential need precisely because the Liturgy presents to us the figure of Jesus, the "Good Shepherd".

The Old Testament already usually speaks of God as the Shepherd of Israel, the people of the covenant, chosen by him to carry out the plan of salvation. Psalm 22 is a marvellous hymn to the Lord, the Shepherd of our soul:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; / he makes me lie down in green pastures, / he leads me beside still waters, / he restores my soul. / He leads me in paths of righteousness... / Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, / I fear no evil; / for thou art with me..." (Ps 22:1-3).

The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel often return to the subject of the people as "the Lord's flock": "Behold your God!... He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms..." (Is 40:11). Above all, they announce the Messiah as a Shepherd who will really feed his sheep and not let them go astray any more: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd..." (Ez 34: 23).

This sweet and moving figure of the shepherd is a familiar one in the Gospel. Even if times have changed owing to industrialization and urbanism, it always keeps its fascination and effectiveness; and we all remember the touching and poetic parable of the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7).

In the early times of the Church, Christian iconography used a great deal and developed this subject of the Good Shepherd, whose image often appears, painted or sculpted, in the catacombs, sarcophagi and baptismal fonts. This iconography, so interesting and reverent, testifies to us that, right from the early times of the Church, Jesus "the Good Shepherd" struck and moved the hearts of believers and non-believers, and was a cause of conversion, spiritual commitment and comfort. Well, Jesus "the Good Shepherd" is still alive and true today in our midst, in the midst of the whole of mankind, and he wants to let each of us hear his voice and feel his love.

1) *What does it mean to be the Good Shepherd?*

Jesus explains it to us with convincing clearness.

— The shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know him. How wonderful and consoling it is to know that Jesus knows us one by one; that for him we are not anonymous persons; that our name—that name which is agreed upon by loving parents and friends—is known to him! For Jesus we are not a "mass", a "multitude"! We are individual "persons" with an eternal value, both as creatures and as re-deemed persons! He knows us! He knows me, and loves me and gave himself for me! (Gal 2:20);

— The shepherd feeds his sheep and leads them to fresh and abundant pastures. Jesus came to bring life to souls, and to give it in superabundance. And the life of souls consists essentially in three supreme realities: truth, grace, glory. Jesus is the truth, because he is the Word incarnate. He is the "head of the corner", as St Peter said to the rulers of the people and elders, the stone on which alone it is possible to construct the family, social, and political edifice: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12).

Jesus gives us "grace", that is divine life, by means of Baptism and the other sacraments. Through "grace", we become participants in the very trinitarian nature of God! An immense mystery, but of inexpressible joy and consolation!

Jesus, finally, will give us the glory of Paradise, complete and eternal glory, where we will be loved and will love, participants in God's own happiness which is Infinite even in joy! "It does not yet appear what we shall be", St John comments, "but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 33:3).

— The shepherd defends his sheep; he is not like the mercenary who flees when the wolf arrives, because he does not care about the sheep at all. Unfortunately we know very well that there are still mercenaries in the world who sow hatred, malice, doubt, confusion of ideas and of the senses. Jesus, on the contrary, with the light of his divine word and with the strength of his sacramental and ecclesial presence, forms our mind, strengthens the will, purifies sentiments, and thus defends and saves from so many painful and dramatic experiences.

— The shepherd even offers his life for his sheep. Jesus realized the project of divine love by means of his death on the cross! He offered himself on the cross to redeem man, every individual man, created by love for the eternity of Love!

— Finally, the shepherd feels the desire to increase his flock. Jesus clearly affirms his universal concern: "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn 10:16). Jesus wants all men to know him, love him and follow him.

2) *Jesus wanted the priest in the Church as the "Good Shepherd".*

The parish is the Christian community, enlightened by the example of the Good Shepherd, around its own Parish Priest and priest collaborators.

In the parish the priest continues the mission and the task of Jesus; therefore he must "feed the flock", he must teach, instruct, give grace, defend souls from error and evil, console, help, convert and, above all, love.

Therefore, with all the anxiety of my heart as Pastor of the universal Church I say to you: love your priests! Esteem them, listen to them, follow them! Pray for them every day. Do not leave them alone either at the altar or in daily life!

And never stop praying for priestly vocations and for perseverance in the commitment of consecration to the Lord and to souls. But, above all, create in your families an atmosphere suitable for the flourishing of vocations. And, you parents, be generous in responding to God's plans for your children.

3) Finally, Jesus wants everyone to be a "good shepherd".

Every Christian, by virtue of Baptism, is called to be himself a "good shepherd" in the environment in which he lives. You parents must exercise the functions of the Good Shepherd with regard to your children; and you, too, children, must be edifying with your love, your obedience and above all with your courageous and consistent faith. Also the mutual relations between husband and wife must be marked by the example of the Good Shepherd, in order that family life may always have

that nobility of sentiments and ideals willed by the Creator, because of which the family has been defined the "domestic Church". So also at school, at work, in playgrounds and places of leisure, in hospitals and where people are suffering, let everyone always try to be a "good shepherd" like Jesus. But above all let persons consecrated to God, Religious, Sisters, those who belong to the Secular Institutes, be "good shepherds" in society. Today and always we must pray for all religious vocations, male and female, in order that this testimony of religious life in the Church may be more and more numerous, alive, intense, and always efficacious. Today more than ever the world needs convinced witnesses who are completely consecrated!

Beloved Faithful, I conclude by recalling the heartfelt invocation of Jesus the Good Shepherd: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:37; Lk 10:2).

If only my pastoral visit would bring forth in your parish some priestly vocations among you, young men and boys, innocent and devoted; some religious and missionary vocations among you, young women and girls, blossoming to life, full of enthusiasm!

Let us commend the desire to the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of Jesus the Good Shepherd, our Mother and the inspirer of every sacred vocation!

Let us also invoke the intercession of the Servant of God, Canon Annibale of France, founder of the Congregation of "Rogationists" which, with its vocational centre "Rogate", dedicates its activity mainly to the promotion of priestly and religious vocations.

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