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OUR CALL TO BE GOOD SHEPHERDS

A reflection taken from The Names of Christ by Fr. Luis de Leon

“Jesus said, I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep!” Jesus is not only a shepherd but a shepherd such as had never existed before. To call himself the “good” shepherd indicates that he is the best shepherd of all. There are four reasons for this.

In the first place Christ was born to be our shepherd; i.e., the shepherd for the entire human race. Most shepherds are entrusted with sheep but the Son of God descended from Heaven to seek out all those who were lost and make them into a flock. He was born as a human being precisely for this reason and he hinted as much by arranging that his birth be proclaimed first to ordinary shepherds.

In the second place, what we owe to Christ is not just a matter of receiving guidance and nourishment. Yes, he protects us and leads us and shows us the way to real life, but, in fact, we were savage animals when he came. He has transformed us into sheep! He has given us a spirit of simplicity and humility and even sweetness and so transformed us inwardly and made us sheep, his sheep.

In the third place, he died for the good of his flock in a way that no other shepherds have or could. He agreed to become a wolf’s victim in order to save us from that wolf, and he shows us that those who are killed by wolves or other enemies are not dead for ever. He restores even the dead to a new life.

This is shown by the fourth mark that shows he is the only perfect shepherd. Besides doing all the good things other pastors do, he made himself our nourishment. In feeding us this shepherd gives himself to us. Christ came among us and, so to speak, became so close to us as to be permeated by all that is ours—except sin. He took our life and then took us into his own life so that we would be transformed into him. We don’t just feed on Christ; we remove ourselves—let him remove us, from our old selves and take upon ourselves the qualities of Christ. We slowly become one with our Shepherd.

In reality, after his human birth, he feeds us from his spirit and his flesh. As Scripture says, *“We wait upon you that you many give us our nourishment at the right time”*. He continues to rain nourishment upon us even after ascending to the Heavenly Father. In a thousand secret and marvelous ways Christ gives himself to us and makes that gift our food of transformation. As on earth he feeds us, so in heaven he will still be our shepherd. There he will lead us as a shepherd leads sheep to pasture and we, as his sheep, will live for endless centuries, for eternity, rejoicing in the gift of his own life.

Christ is our shepherd and our pasture. What he has already given us only foreshadows what is to come. With these gifts we can lead others to their good and true shepherd. What we have received we are to share with others who have not yet received it, and we are to so build one another up that all turn more and more wholly to Christ and so to our Heavenly Father.

THE BONDS BINDING US TO GOD

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

We don't stand around idle all day because we both know whom we seek and who has hired us. Seek the Lord while he can be found, we are told. Behold, the day for seeking and finding is today. Indeed, we are seeking because our Lord found us to begin with and called us and sent us to work in his vineyard. We are not like straying sheep because our Good Shepherd has found us!

And yet we go on seeking our God. Where is God? Where is God not? God is nowhere and everywhere. No place is empty of God's presence and yet no place can contain God. Why am I not always with my God? It is because I wander away into sin. I sought life's fullness in fleeting pleasures, social position and respect and in having this or that. And I wasted away! We must turn to the shepherd of our souls and cling to him with all our might.

What bonds can bind us to our Lord and shepherd? There are three. There are ropes, there are nails and there is glue. Each one of these binds more strongly and enduringly than the previous one.

The rope that most binds us is an inward image we have of integrity and of God's promise to us if we live it. When troubled by a violent temptation we call this to mind so as to turn us away from what will separate us from God. The problem is that this bond often doesn't last; ropes rot away into uselessness.

When we feel our ropes yielding we rely on the nail that is fear of God. But we may not so much fear sinning as we fear burning in hell. If this is vividly present to us then the bond such fear creates will restrain us from sin. But perhaps we may not die soon and that thought lessens fear. We need a stronger bond.

If ropes and nails fail us, then we need glue. It is a powerful glue called love. One who is joined to the Lord by love is one Spirit with the Lord. One who is joined to God in this way can use everything that happens, outwardly or in personal experience, as an opportunity to love God. Such a person loves others and God, and prays much for others and for their increase in love for God.

We may describe these bond as shame, fear and love. And the greatest is love. We find the first weak because it seems that we are trying only to hope in ourselves and what we want to be. We find the second stronger simply because our hope is now founded on God. But only love fixes us immovably in God. It is God's love for us, which casts out shame and fear and perfects us.

We know our shepherd's voice and follow it because we love him who love us so perfectly. Our God doesn't allow his chosen ones to remain in shame and fear. God anoints us with mercy as he accompanies us while they are being crucified to the world. Then we can cry out: Who can separate me from the love of God? Seek the Lord and be strengthened. Seek God's face evermore! He has come to seek you. Let us seek God always and long for nothing more than for God's face. In it is the fullness of life.

SHARING OUR TASTE FOR GOD

A reflection by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

Like new-born infants crave spiritual milk that you may grow up to salvation, if indeed you have tasted how sweet the Lord is! Why are we encouraged to want this if we have already tasted how sweet the Lord is? You have seen and reflected on Jesus Christ on his cross and have seen his arms outstretched as if to embrace you. You have seen this with the eyes of your heart and so seen it more clearly than many did when they saw it with their eyes. So, you have tasted how sweet, humble, meek, merciful, gentle and caring the Lord is. And you have tasted this at the table of his Body and Blood. He willed that it should always be before our eyes, and that it should not only be our ransom but our food.

What are we to do now that we have tasted so much? We are to go with the holy women to the tomb. We are to go with the aromatic oils of devotion and love. We are to seek our Lord with faith and devotion and charity. These are the ointments we have to bring it we expect to find the Risen Christ.

How wonderful it is that Christ willed that women first learn of his resurrection and announce it to the other disciples. It falls to women to provide milk to little ones. They, and we, experience such milk in Christ's great compassion. And we who see and taste this must keep craving it! Cave it and taste it. Taste the faith which works through love. Draw this love from your remembrance of Christ's resurrection. Let's become like new-born infants. Infants have innocence and simplicity. Once we have put off the old person, left behind all that we were which was not of God, once we have allowed ourselves to be crucified with Christ, and so found ourselves rising to a new life with Christ, we are ready to share all that we have received. This is what Christ commanded the women to do. He commanded all the disciples to do it, as he commands us.

What is it that we do when we gather for prayer? Isn't our prayer in common a way of sharing Christ Risen? What is it that we do when we encourage one another to rise up and come to prayer? Isn't our mutual encouragement a way of sharing Christ Risen? What do we do when we help each other do the work that gives us bread to eat? Isn't our work and its product a sharing given us by God so that we might in turn share with others?

Let all that we do be a way of sharing God's gifts to us. This is what God called Adam and Eve to do in the beginning of our race. Now the New Adam and his Church help us to join in the sharing of the Bread that comes down from Heaven. That bread is Christ become one with us so that our lives may be offered to God as the life of Christ. You have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Share what you have tasted as you share your delight.

THE FAITH OF ST. MARK

A reflection taken from discourses by St. Pope John XXIII

I want to remind you of two things. The first is St. Mark's faith; it didn't give up even when he was rejected by others. The second is his devotion to the Gospel message, traditionally said to represent the preaching of St. Peter. This stands for the treasure of truth which we have to guard in our hearts. It is our sacred inheritance, one which our parents in faith bequeathed to us. In this they showed how greatly they honored it and that they refused to treat it as an embellishment of other enterprises. They taught us to accept it as our basic treasury of wisdom and Christian virtues.

Unlike the many ideologies that come and go during human history, no message has succeeded in giving peace to human hearts except that which calls all to faith in Jesus Christ. People long for truth about what is good and brings more abundant life, and they have to avoid being lured astray by various utopias and easy answers. These are only deceit and illusion.

Christianity is not a complex system of oppressive rules, as unbelievers at times think. It is peace and joy and love, and a life that is continually being renewed. Faith works in us like the mysterious pulse of spring. We need to assert this as confidently as the apostles; we need to be as convinced of it as was St. Mark; we need to live it in a way that makes it convincing and attractive.

Only faith can give unflinching meaning and serenity to daily life. In it we find the source of these things, the Risen Christ. He has set us all free from the slavery that is sin; he invites us to become new creatures with him. This is a joyful mystery that has a meaning affecting every single Christian life in its innermost sanctuary of spiritual life. Its power can make us like the Risen Christ.

Throughout the whole of Eastertide, the Church proclaims the joyful truth: The Lord is risen indeed! Those who were sinners and came to Christ are risen too. Those who doubted or were diffident about their faith, or were overly timid or lukewarm, are all risen. So too those who have been sorely tried and who suffer or are poor and oppressed have new hope.

Those who are risen live joy in love. Love is not only a great spring of joy but joy draws its zest from love. God loves us and gives everything for us. We are called to follow him. If we love as Jesus love we will love others as Jesus does, and we will bear witness to life in Christ as joy. It is joy for the world. When all are filled with joy who will have time for hatred and violence and injustice. Come to the Lord and find life. This is St. Mark's message to us now and always. Do not forget the evangelizing power of faith-filled joy.

THE BREAD WE NEED AFTER OUR JOURNEY

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

Recall the Lord's parable about being awakened in the night by a neighbor whose friend has just come from a journey. Why does the parable talk about just that one person and then have him ask for three loaves? Wouldn't one loaf be enough for one person? Do you think that maybe the traveler was so ravenous with hunger that one wouldn't be enough? It seems more reasonable to suppose that more than one person had arrived, perhaps your friend brought his wife and another member of the family.

Let's imagine I am the one asking for bread. Initially I am asking myself for it since I have been on a journey and am often thoroughly worn out and the best friend I have seems to be myself. I love myself more than any other, and yet I know what I lack so it makes no sense to ask myself for it. Think! My journey, and yours, is that of abandoning passing things and coming to myself so as to leave iniquity behind. Scripture says that people who love iniquity hate themselves. Like the Prodigal Son I am wasting away from hunger and weakened from fasting, and I am a beggar! So why ask a beggar for what he doesn't have?

I knew that what I needed was truth about how to live. I had no answer but then I said to myself: There is no such bread in my house but hurry and run and wake up that Great Friend, the one who has greater love than all others, and more provisions! What if I seek and ask and knock at his door, where everyone who asks receives, and to everyone who knocks the door is opened. Call out to that Friend: Lend me three loaves!

You who listen, can you tell me what these loaves are? They are things only you yourself can recognize that you need. I personally knew I needed to ask for truth and then charity and courage. I very much needed them, I freely admit. I still need truth because of my ignorance about where to find true good and true life. Because my affections were starved, thinking no one cared but myself, my will languished so that I couldn't decide to do what was right with consistency. And my body was weakened because I lacked the courage to stand up to my own desires and memories of how I had quieted these longings in the past.

My reason understood none too clearly what should be done. My will loved none too ardently what I understood. And for these reasons the perishable body pressed on me to quiet its distresses in so many old ways. That's how we all end up, and so do what we don't really want to do. Our hearts wither away and our bodies too, because we have forgotten to eat Bread—the true Bread that gives true life.

Would this have happened if reason had continually sought truth, and will sought charity, and our whole self hadn't neglected virtue? Lord, give us these three loaves. As Scripture says, in God's will is life! When you come home to the Heavenly Father simply ask what you really need.

FINDING LIFE BY GIVING ALL TO JESUS

Notes on the Spiritual Life by St. Rafael Arnaiz Baron

“With Jesus at my side nothing seems difficult to me, and I see more that the road to sanctity is simple. Better still, it seems to me that it consists in continuing to get rid of things instead of collecting them, in slowly boiling down to simplicity instead of becoming complicated with new things. In the measure that we detach ourselves from so much disordered love for creatures and for ourselves, it seems to me that we are getting closer and closer to the only love, the sole desire, the one longing of this life. That is true sanctity, which is God.

“To savor the Cross, to live sick and unknown and abandoned by all—only you and the Cross, Lord. How sweet the bitterness, the loneliness, the grief, the pain, wolfed down and swallowed in silence, without help. How sweet the tears shed next to your Cross. Ah! If I knew how to tell the world where true happiness is! But this the world doesn’t understand, nor can it...because to understand the Cross one must love it. To love it one must suffer; and not only suffer but love the suffering in the Lord. O Lord, how few follow you to Calvary.

“When I left my home, by my own deliberate intent, I left behind a series of treatments that my illness required and I came to embrace a state in which it is impossible to care for so touchy a sickness. I knew perfectly well what awaited me. Nevertheless, sometimes, poor Rafael, without your being aware of it, you were suffering, seeing yourself deprived of many necessary things, stripped free of the liberty of giving into the weakness of your illness and so giving it the remedies that out there in the world you did not lack.

“It is difficult to explain why one loves suffering! But I believe that it can be explained because it is not suffering in itself but rather as it is in Christ, and whoever loves Christ loves his Cross.

“If at times God is not in the soul it is because we do not want him there. We have such an accumulation of things to do, of distractions, of interests, vain desires, conceit, we have too much world within us, that God distances himself. But all we have to do is want him. Every day I am happier in my complete abandonment into his hands. I see his will even in the most insignificant and tiny thing that happens. In everything I find a lesson that serves to make me understand better God’s mercy toward me. I love his designs with my whole being, and that is enough.

“My prayer is not good. I neither pray nor meditate nor do my *lectio* well. At work I hardly work. When I eat and sleep I do nothing else—just eat and sleep like a little animal. What one does is nothing in itself and is worth nothing. What is of worth is the way in which it is done. When will I understand that virtue is not in eating an onion but in eating an onion for God? Sanctity is not in external things but in the interior intention of any act whatsoever.”

Rafael wrote this final reflection just two weeks before he died in a diabetic coma.

THE MANY WAYS OF WALKING WITH JESUS

A reflection developed from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

A group of women went to the tomb of Jesus and didn't find him there. But they met him as they went home. Two disciples were going to their home at Emmaus and met Jesus as they walked along, but didn't recognize him. How can I meet Jesus and recognize him? Think first of how many different walks we take and remember that all of them can bring us into Jesus' company.

There are people who devote themselves to obtaining justice for all, and there are those who devote themselves to contemplation. Jesus deigns to meet and manifest himself to those concerned with justice just as he does to those who contemplate. Many of you remember what you have experienced such a meeting with Jesus. Maybe you sought him at an altar and he unexpectedly came to you while you were working. You tried to draw near and hold onto his feet but you couldn't until you ceased to be sparing of your own feet and obeyed God's command to work in a particular way. Work demands a lot of coming and going ordinarily and some think this gets in the way of Jesus working with us. Jesus didn't spare his feet from work and walking anymore than from the nails; he did these things on our account. With Jesus every walk is walk of love. But isn't every walk in life when one genuinely seeks Christ a walk of love?

I ask all of you who have had such experiences: Wasn't your heart burning in you on account of Jesus when he spoke to you on as you were doing this or that and helped you see the practical and spiritual meaning of the Scriptures for you? Let those who have experienced this remember and let those who have not believe what you hear and pray to be given this grace of experience.

We are celebrating Easter. Let the spirit of each one of us rise and come to life, whether by watchfulness in prayer or by constancy in work. This is how we are to experience a share in Christ's resurrection. The first sign of life's return after illness is energy and diligence in action. Its perfect realization is contemplation. So there is, so to speak, a growth in resurrection as though it takes place by stages. We work and then we contemplate.

Remember the child Elisha raised to life. First his flesh grew warm and then he yawned and finally opened his eyes. First, our hearts find new warmth and a new hope that can carry us beyond previous torpors. Second, we meditate on what is happening to and within us and we experience a kind of flame in our hearts. Third, we experience a hunger, a hunger for God's justice realized in a love that seek to supply all with need to walk and find Christ. When we open our hearts under the influence of God's Spirit we long to do God's commandments in love. The first sign of life is the good works done by love. The second sign is the longing for prayer and God's closer presence. The third is contemplation. Love alone can recognizes the Lord and so it alone leads to contemplation.