

***Twenty-fourth Sunday Per Annum (C)***  
***September 11, 2016.***

*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost (1Tim. 1:15).*

The parable of the Good Shepherd, perhaps one of the best known of Our Lord's parables, communicates to us, and to all who have ever heard it the very essence of the Christian message: *that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.* Through His parables Our Lord invites us *to the feast of the Kingdom, but He also asks for a radical choice: to gain the kingdom, one must give everything. Words are not enough; deeds are required (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 546).* Our Lord Himself exemplifies for us how we are to respond to Him because in His Sacrifice on the Cross He gives us everything of Himself. In speaking of Himself as the Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep, Our Lord reveals the love that God has for us. This love is not a generic love, so to speak, but a *personal love* which searches for and rejoices in each person, especially those furthest from Him. *'Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost.'* *Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Lk. 15:6-7).*

The parable of the Good Shepherd very simply communicates a very profound theological or religious truth, indeed the very essence of our Trinitarian faith in God: Who in becoming Man comes out of Himself, bridging the infinite distance between Creator and creature, and Who takes us by the hand, in such a way that with Christ we return to God and are united to Him in the loving communion of the Holy Trinity. This is the novelty of Christianity, and the fullest revelation of the truth of God in relation to the human person. It is a truth that each one of us can only fully understand and appreciate through the aid of a personal, prayerful relationship with Our Lord. This is a relationship which deepens through grace, imitation and love.

This love for Jesus, the Messiah is something completely new, without any precedent in Judaism. Many texts of the Old Testament speak of how God would intervene and save His people, but the individual member of the Jewish people is never exhorted to love the Messiah. It is an undying love for the person of the Messiah which the first Christians saw as an essential way of expressing their relationship with Our Lord. This is new; and perhaps in part, it explains why the earliest representations of Our Lord favoured the Good Shepherd. *'Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost.'* The boundless love of Our Lord for each one of us individually can only be returned by a personal love on our part, a love that please God, becomes the unconditional priority in our lives as we grow in the grace of our discipleship. This is why we endeavour to make the worship of God in the Mass the centre of our life, for here we listen attentively to Our Lord and receive Him with love and devotion in Holy Communion.

The Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas says of the Eucharist that *since it is the sacrament of Our Lord's Passion, it contains in itself the Jesus Christ who suffered for us. Thus, whatever is an effect of Our Lord's Passion is also an effect of this sacrament. For this sacrament is nothing other than the application of Our Lord's Passion to us.* What this means at a very personal and intimate level is that the grace that each one of

receives in this Sacrament is a grace that corresponds to our own very specific needs: this grace heals in us what is specific to our own wounds, it sanctifies and fortifies what is good in us for God's greater glory and our salvation. This is how the personal love of Our Lord for each one of us sanctifies us and enables us to reflect His own goodness, truth and beauty. St. Ambrose observed that *the Church is beautiful in her saints*. This is the wealth and power of the Church; not political prestige, not real estate. We contribute to this commonwealth, what is held in common, by striving for holiness which is best defined as the perfection of charity. This is true of every saint, whether a martyr, or widow or virgin or confessor. What is the characteristic of saints, without exception? They cultivate friendship because it is one the noblest manifestations of the human heart and has something divine about it. When we cultivate a profound and intimate friendship with Our Lord, we develop a great capacity to befriend others and to lead them also to Our Lord, our origin and our ultimate destiny.

In the Eucharist, the Sacrament of His Sacred Passion, Our Lord increases in us that supernatural love or charity that *is the friendship of man for God and for all that belong to Him* (St. Thomas Aquinas). One of the effects of this Sacrament then, perhaps the most important in relation to our life in common is that it enables us to relate to others in a manner that transcends the selfishness and pettiness that so often are the cause of so much rancour and turmoil. Our Eucharistic Lord is not only the Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep. As Man, He is our way to God and in the journey of life He teaches us to model our own life on His own life in gentleness and humility. He is our companion on the journey, the goal of the journey and the food our journey. As we make it our glory to praise and to worship the Most Holy Trinity in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, may the grace of the Holy Eucharist which we receive today *take possession of our minds and bodies, so that its effects, and not our own desires, may always prevail in us* (Prayer after Communion, Twenty-Fourth Sunday Per Annum, *The Roman Missal*).