Father Cantalamessa on the Flock of Christ

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on This Sunday's Gospel

ROME, MAY 5, 2006 (Zenit.org).- Here is a translation of a commentary by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa on this Sunday's liturgical readings. He is the preacher to the Pontifical Household.

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I Am the Good Shepherd

The Fourth Sunday of Eastertide is called "Good Shepherd Sunday." To understand the importance that the theme of the shepherd has in the Bible, one must go back to history.

The Bedouins of the desert give us today an idea of what was, at one time, the life of the tribes of Israel. In that society the relationship between the shepherd and the flock is not only of an economic type, based on interest. An almost personal relationship was developed between the shepherd and the flock. Days and days were spent together in solitary places, without any one around. The shepherd ended up by knowing everything about each sheep; the sheep recognized the voice of the shepherd, who talked frequently to the sheep, and distinguishes his voice among all others.

This explains why God made use of this symbol to express his relationship with humanity. One of the Psalter's most beautiful psalms describes the security of the believer in having God as shepherd: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Subsequently the title shepherd is given, by extension, also to those who act for God on earth: kings, priests, leaders in general. But in this case the symbol is divided: It no longer evokes images of protection and security, but also of exploitation and oppression.

Along with the image of the good shepherd appears that of the evil shepherd, of the mercenary. In the prophet Ezekiel we come across a terrible accusation against evil shepherds who only feed themselves, followed by God's promise to look after his flock himself (Ezekiel 34:1ff).

In the Gospel Jesus takes up the idea of the good and evil shepherd, but with a novelty. "I am the good shepherd!" he says. God's promise has become a reality, exceeding all expectations. Christ does what no shepherd does, no matter how good he is: He is prepared to "Give my life for the sheep."

The man of today rejects with contempt the role of the sheep and the idea of a flock, but he does not realize that he is completely inside it. One of the most obvious phenomena of our society is its "massification." We let ourselves be led in a supine manner by all kinds of manipulation and concealed persuasion.

Others create models of well-being and behavior, ideals and objectives of progress, and we follow them; we go behind them, afraid to be out of step, conditioned and kidnapped by advertising. We eat what they tell us,

we dress as they show us, we speak as we hear them speak, in slogans. The criteria by which the majority let themselves be led in their choices is "Così fan tutti" (Everybody does it), of Mozartian memory.

Look how the life of the masses develops in a large modern city: It is the sad image of a flock that goes out together, is agitated, and crowds the cars of trains and subways and then, in the evening, returns to the sheepfold empty of self and of freedom. We smile in amusement when we see a people filmed in fast-forward, moving by leaps and bounds, speedily, as puppets, but it is the image we would have of ourselves if we looked with less superficial eyes.

The Good Shepherd, who is Christ, proposes that, with him, we experience liberation. To belong to his flock is not to fall into "massification," but to be preserved from it. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17), says St. Paul.

Here the person emerges, with his unique richness and true destiny. The son of God emerges, still hidden, of which the second letter of this Sunday speaks: "Beloved, now we are children of God, though we do not yet know what we shall be."

[Translation by ZENIT]

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