

Spirituality: Source of Spirit and Life

“I am the Good Shepherd”

Reflection in Light of our Chapter Commitment to “Shepherd God’s Creation”

In our previous reflection on Shepherding God’s Creation, we noted that we are now called to expand our shepherding in order to include the other-than-human or more-than-human (which includes the human). This ambitious project invites us to read our sacred texts anew, situating our reading as human beings less at the centre of creation and more in kinship with all that exists.¹ It calls us to read our sacred texts critically, recognizing that they were generally written from human-centred, even male-centred, perspectives. It calls us to restore to our living tradition the voices of the whole Earth community.

We begin our reflection with the story of one of our own Sisters who has been formed in a shepherding tradition from childhood. Remember that signs and symbols have their origins in the materiality of lived experience, and that they are best understood through reflection on lived experience. We read in a free translation of the words of artist Thomas Gleb: “A *material entity reveals a sign and a sign leads to further revelations, endlessly.*”²

A Good Shepherd in our Midst: Sr. Monique Perrocheau’s Story

Before Sr Monique left the community in Angers for Toulon, she shared with some of us her experience of being a good shepherd in the Vendée area long before she heard the call to be a Good Shepherd Sister:

“I remember giving a little lamb a bottle with a teat, when the mother was unable to feed the little one. Our job was mainly to keep the sheep and the lambs within their boundaries. There were holes in the hedges and we had to make sure that the sheep did not stray on to the neighbours’ properties. When one got away, the others would follow. We had no watches in those days. We told the time by watching the shadow on the stick that was part of our equipment. All of this was part of the natural rhythm of our lives. Summer was shearing time. Spinning, weaving, and knitting were part of everyday life. I remember well the knitted stockings. I also remember the co-operation between neighbours in the area at harvest time. The main event was a big communal feast once a year. Everyone would gather and share the food that came from the sheep and the cows.”

Monique’s story finds a mirror in the gospel story of the Good Shepherd to which we now turn. Allow Monique’s story and the Chapter statement about shepherding God’s creation to inform your reading of the gospel text. Allow your imagination to engage with what you have heard and seen in person or through images of the bible lands.

The Gospel Story (John 10:11-14)

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd.

¹ Our sacred texts include those of our biblical heritage and those of our congregational founders, SJE and SME.

² *Hommage à Thomas Gleb* (Musée d’Angers, 2011), p.39.

In John's gospel, Jesus actually identifies with the shepherds. The statement, "*I am the good shepherd*", is metaphorical or symbolic. It is surely grounded or earthed, however, in Jesus' own direct experience of observing those who cared for the sheep.³ There may have been shepherds in his family circle. He would have certainly seen many shepherds, sheep and lambs in and around his home town of Nazareth and beyond.

Jesus would have known the demands and the temptations that the shepherds faced. He would have understood the tendency of the sheep and even of the shepherds to stray into places that did not belong to them in order to find grazing. He would have been very aware that the shepherds were despised by many people. He would have known the impact of his words in certain quarters, especially among those for whom a "good shepherd" was a contradiction in terms.

Let us now attend to what SME has to say about the image of the Good Shepherd in John's Gospel and the implications of this gospel image for our congregation. It may be good to bring the passage from John 10 and the reflections of SME and Sr. Monique into dialogue with each other and allow our imagination to engage with what we know of the land of SME's life and ministry.

St. Mary Euphrasia's Commentary

"How, in fact, do good shepherds act? They forget themselves and often have to endure hunger and thirst. They are crushed by fatigue and difficulties – no matter! They are happy if their sheep do not suffer and if they find those that are lost. What trouble they take to lead their sheep to good pastures! In summer they seek out places where there is water and shade; in winter they lead them to where the cold is less biting and the grass more abundant. If they notice poisonous plants near the little lambs, they hasten to pull them up. Day and night they are on guard against wolves – they never completely relax (pluralized for inclusion!)."⁴

One gets the impression, from the detail in her commentary, that SME is intimately acquainted with the ways of sheep and lambs and of those who care for them, the good shepherds of her time. Perhaps she is bringing her own childhood experience of shepherds and sheep in Noirmoutier, or Tours, or Angers to her reflection on the text. Perhaps she witnessed shepherds leading the sheep into good pastures, seeking out places where there was not just water, but also shade to shield them from the heat of the summer sun. Perhaps she herself identified with the little lambs that the shepherds protected from dangerous and death-dealing plants. Her conferences and letters reveal that, like Jesus, she identified with the shepherds and called on her sisters to join her in shepherding young women exposed to any kind of danger.

Towards Ecological Conversion

- As we ponder the meaning of Jesus' statement, "*I am the good shepherd*" and SME's commentary on it, we might reflect on the human and other-than-human elements of the Earth community that inspired Jesus of Nazareth to identify with the shepherd who cares for his own sheep and for those on the margins. What "other things" does the symbol of the Good Shepherd keep revealing to us? How might it call us to recognize our kinship with all of creation?

³ The great French philosopher Paul Ricoeur defines 'symbol' as "*any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.*" See *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) p. 13.

⁴ *Conferences*, Ch. 6:4, p.61.