

THE PRIEST AS GOOD SHEPHERD

Self-understanding of a Founding Generation

DD (1963) III, 67-71 and 86-87

Translated by Fr. Jonathan Niehaus, January 2004

In his interpretation, he connected two points of view. At first he looked at Jesus as the Good Shepherd (in the context of the OT, in particular the prophetic criticism of the bad shepherds of the people in Ez 34). He then turned to the students sitting before him who felt called to found the community of the Schoenstatt Fathers. He explained what the ideal of the Good Shepherd meant for them and demanded of them.

The text is particularly significant because Father Kentenich was talking to a **founding generation** and aimed at forming them as his co-founders. He was confident that they would assimilate his words into open hearts, reflect on them independently, and fully accept the responsibility being handed over to them.

In order that the ideas should not remain in their minds, but should sink into their hearts, he repeated the central thoughts several times, each time from another perspective. The following passages can be found in the German edition of DD, 1963, Vol. 3, pages 67-71 (25th Conference), and pages 86-87 (26th Conference).

To start with, Father Kentenich read the pericope Jo 10, 1-21.

[67] So I should embody the ideal of the Good Shepherd. Let me highlight a few elements of this ideal, which are of particular importance to you at the moment. You will then not find it difficult to continue to spin the individual threads until you finally have a really large fabric before you.

[1. Jesus the Good Shepherd – Old Testament background]

“ **I am the Good Shepherd**” (Jo 10,11a). That is a general characteristic. I don't know what I should now emphasize in detail. I shall first of all interpret the words as spoken by our Lord. It is as though our Lord is embracing the whole of world history, the whole of salvation history, as it took place in the people of Israel.

[The picture in the context of the history of salvation for Israel]

[68] Jesus reached back into distant centuries. When he used the picture of the Good Shepherd, he was well aware of how the people of Israel, especially the Pharisees [and scribes] had understood it. He reached back to the preaching of the Prophets. How did they depict the ideal of the shepherd? The priests and kings [as the shepherds of the people] should serve their people in some way. The prophets filled in the details of the picture. They pointed out to the priests and

kings: Look, Yahweh has made you the shepherds of the people. Are you really their good shepherds? Some of you may have been, but on the whole there has been a great deal of depravity. The prophets then went on to describe the negative picture in classic terms. Shepherds, you should serve the sheep, but what have you done instead? Look at how much profit you have made at the expense of your sheep. You have fed yourselves on their milk, you have made use of their fat (see Ez 34,3).

[Prophetic criticism and prophecy of redemption]

Can you understand what that means? You have not served the sheep, you have abused the sheep [for your own selfish purposes]. The sheep had to serve you, you have not served them. Then [after this criticism] a great prophecy follows: A time will come when I will send you shepherds foreseen and pre-destined for you by God from all eternity. Our Lord is the answer to this prophetic utterance. We can assume that the people listening to him had a clear understanding of the context. The scribes and Pharisees lived out of the Scriptures, they taught out of the Scriptures [the Old Testament].

2. We, the disciples of Jesus – called to be shepherds

The general criticism now begins. You should emphasize our Lord's words in this way: I am the Good Shepherd. Can you understand what that means? I am the Good Shepherd prophesied and foreseen by the Prophets.

[69] Let me ask you now to have the courage to apply those words to yourselves, precisely in the way you need them at present. This presupposes that our faith in our mission [for the Schoenstatt Family] has a solid foundation. You may then have the courage to tell yourselves: I am *the* good shepherd foreseen from all eternity for this little community, which I have now to lead, to bear, to imbue with soul; I am *the* good shepherd foreseen for this task.

[Application to those who bear responsibility: the Paterfamilias]

We will not find it difficult – especially since we are so strongly orientated to faith in Divine Providence – to remember at all times: What has become a reality in life here [in Schoenstatt] is in keeping with a plan. When we are together here as the 'founding generation' [of the new community], and when we think of the leader and leaders [the Paterfamilias of the little community], we think of the significance of those words: I am *the* good shepherd foreseen from all eternity for this epoch in time. None of my equals, no one before me, no one who comes after me, has been given the task which has been given to me. I was foreseen for it by God. I may be very clearly convinced, I can be certain that if I do not give my all to fulfil the task God has given me for the present situation, my life will ultimately be a tremendous fiasco. However, it will not just affect my own life [as Paterfamilias], the whole community will normally fail, because the

shepherd foreseen for it has failed. I need somehow to see my mission with this organic one-sidedness, then I will become aware of how much depends on me...

**[Application to each individual member
with a view to leading the Schoenstatt Family]**

If you realize that you are the beginning of the community of priestly leaders, and if you are aware that generation after generation will follow you, you will see clearly how much depends on our little community. How much! Unless we see our mission clearly, we will probably lead the generations that come after us astray. How much depends on the good shepherd [the paterfamilias], whom God has foreseen for us! How much depends on us as a community of leaders, of shepherds, of fathers!

[70] I think you cannot stress this sense of responsibility too much or too seriously. Otherwise we will be in danger of becoming mass-men on a higher level.

When you are together, you should, however, be careful not to think only of the coming generations. You must also think of your own generation here and now. When you meet, you should consider: what can we do for later on? However, you should not forget to ask at the same time: what are the needs of our little community here and now? [...] Let me repeat: I am the good shepherd. We are the community of good shepherds, which has been given such a great mission, generation after generation.

[Summary of what was said in 26th Conference, pages 86-87]

[86] "I am the Good Shepherd". May I repeat something that is most important, and that I want to beg repeatedly for you to be given? It is this tremendously strongly anchored sense of responsibility. What does our Lord want to stress? He wants to point out how much responsibility he bears, because he is the Good Shepherd foreseen by the Father from all eternity for the whole world, and for the whole order of salvation.

I am the Good Shepherd. I have also been drawn into our Lord's work as a shepherd. For whom? First of all for our own circle [our little community]. Try to find out for yourselves whether it is an exaggeration when I say that I have been called by God - for as long as I live - to bear responsibility for the mission of our community for our present times. So if I fail, what will be the consequence? If I do not bear the full responsibility, disorder will enter into the history of the world and salvation, and I will be to blame. So we can conclude that our community depends essentially on me and my fatherly activity.

[87] Let us pray for one another, so that these thoughts may touch us deeply, and that we may be torn out of the leveling tendency of our way of thinking and feeling. Perhaps we could formulate such ideas in a special little prayer we have made for ourselves and that also takes up our personal ideal. Then we will be able to impress the thoughts presented to us upon ourselves - not just on our minds, but also on our hearts.

[The three characteristics of the Good Shepherd]

[71] I would like to place the emphasis somewhere else as well: I am the *Good* Shepherd. In contrast: I am not a bad shepherd. I am not a lazy shepherd. I am not a selfish shepherd. I am a good shepherd. Now comes the great question: How can we describe the ideal of the Good Shepherd? When you meditate on the parable [in John 10], you will find that our Lord describes himself from three points of view: The Good Shepherd is characterized by his

- ◆ Shepherd's love,
- ◆ Shepherd's concern and care,
- ◆ Shepherd's faithfulness.

[3. Ways to assimilate these thoughts personally]

As I describe these qualities of the Good Shepherd, please keep two trends of thought in mind and think both these questions through for yourselves:

Firstly:

How did our Lord himself live the three characteristics of the Good Shepherd – the love of the shepherd, the faithfulness of the shepherd and the concern and care of the shepherd?

Secondly:

What do these three characteristics mean in my life, presupposing that I have been called to the priesthood?

[...]

[72] In conclusion, allow me to ask you once again to do what I have already suggested a number of times – we should try to break these thoughts up for yourselves into their tiny elements. At present it is for you less important to remember the large context; that is more a matter of study and learning. You can do this if you like. However, for our practical lives it seems to me to be better to pick out the thoughts that have touched your hearts somewhat. You can take it that God wants to impress you more deeply with those thoughts. If you like, you can help yourselves by asking three methodological questions:

- a. What is God saying to me through these thoughts that have aroused me inwardly, that have inspired me?
- b. What can I tell myself? And thirdly,
- c. What do I want to say to God? What is my answer to him?

Then I should like to remind you again not to forget to allow the sun to shine on you. Which sun is meant? It could be our Lord, it could be the heavenly Father, it could be the Blessed Mother. What is important is to be quietly open – unlocked – for all that comes from above. It may even seem to us that we have fallen prey to a sort of quietism [inactivity]. “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!” (Ps 94).