

## 15. Returning to the flock on the shoulders of Christ

“May you imitate the merciful example of the Good Shepherd” (RB 27:8).

I was saying before, that St. Benedict had his eyes set on Jesus, the merciful Shepherd, and when he asks the abbot to imitate His pious example, the first thing he asks of him is that the abbot learn how to be and to act, “holding the gaze fixed on Jesus, He who gives origin to the faith and brings it to fulfilment”, as we see written in the Letter to the Hebrews (12:2).

God's mercy, before being a moral requirement, a commandment, a task to be undertaken, is first of all for us the light that radiates from God Himself, the light of His presence amongst us, the light that is of Christ's face and of His life. He who watches Christ, he who contemplates Him, he who welcomes the Gospel, lets himself be irradiated by the mercy of the Father — and the Holy Spirit gives us the grace to reflect this light on towards our neighbour, whomever he may be, especially the neighbour who is hurt or lost; and even the neighbour who is to us “the enemy”.

When Benedict begins to describe the Good Shepherd in chapter 27 of the Rule, he does so therefore contemplating Christ, and he sees in this figure all the mystery of the incarnate Son of God, he sees His whole life shared with our humanity, sees His passion and death, and His resurrection. Christ is the revelation of the fulness of the love of God. St. Benedict, during his stay in Rome, was probably able to see the images of the Good Shepherd of early Christian art, in the catacombs and on the sarcophaguses, or in the early mosaics. When he says that Jesus takes the lost sheep "on His sacred shoulders" (RB 27:9), he surely thinks of Jesus carrying the Cross. The "carrying" of Jesus, the "carrying *us*" of Jesus is sacred, is an expression of his divinity, because "God is love" (1Jn 4:16).

Earlier this summer, during the course for the Superiors of the Cistercian Order, I said, commenting on the parable of the lost sheep from Luke 15:3-7, that I only recently discovered that a sheep is not as light as it looks in so many of the romanticised images of the Good Shepherd, where he seems to be able to skip lightly between the mountains, cheerfully whistling! An adult sheep — and it is especially the "adult sheep" who get themselves lost — weighs in at around 45-100 kg, that is, just like a human person! Carrying one is tiring, a sacrifice. I now always think of this, when in one way or another I happen to be called to support "psychologically heavy" people, and above all I think of those who have supported — and support — me. And psychologically speaking, I know I'm far heavier than my physical weight, which already is not slight...

Jesus knew what He was saying when He spoke of carrying the sheep on His shoulders, because He grew up in the midst of sheep, and certainly the Holy Family of Nazareth had to have had a few sheep or goats, in addition to a donkey and some chickens. Sometimes it is good to bring out the realism of the Gospel, especially for those of us who dwell in towns or cities where one can live for years without seeing a single sheep or chicken, still less a donkey or a camel! It is because of this, that the realism of the gospel is the visible concreteness of the love God has for each one of us — and we all need this concreteness, as when Jesus, after having raised the daughter of Jairus, does not say to go to the temple and sing a *Te Deum*, but to give her something to eat... (Mk 5:43; Lk 8:55).

The Lord carries us. He moves us as Lord, as *Kyrios*, as God. The shoulders of the Good Shepherd are "sacred" because it is God who carries us. Already Deuteronomy reminds the people of this: "The Lord, your God, carried you, as a man carries his own son, for the whole journey that you have travelled" (Dt 1:31b). He does not only carry us like a social worker may sustain us, a psychologist, or any generous person: He carries us like God, inasmuch as He *is* God. And this means that in the letting of ourselves be found and carried by Christ, we experience God. In mercy, we experience God, so very intimate and constant, like the children I see in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Bolivia, that the mothers carry all day on their backs, with these small children taking part in everything that the mothers do, going wherever the mother goes. In this way God also carries us — or would like to carry us.

But as Benedict portrays it, the "carrying of us" by Christ the Good Shepherd is yet still more intense, because when He carries us, the Lord does this alone, He dedicates all of Himself to the carrying of us, it is His work, His exclusive activity. In fact, He has left the rest of the sheep, the whole flock, in order to dedicate Himself to only seeking and carrying the single lost sheep.

But the carrying of us by Christ also has a direction. It's a "carrying" that also "brings back", which leads the sheep back to the flock: "He went to seek that single sheep that had got itself lost, and whose weakness had so moved him to compassion that he deigned to put it (*imponere*) on his sacred shoulders in order to carry it back (*reportare*) to the flock." (RB 27:8-9).

God "deigns" to put us on His shoulders. Because it is a gesture of humility: God puts Himself under us: who carries us on His shoulders, "supports — *sub porta*", carries from below. A child that the father puts on his shoulders, he finds himself higher than the father.

Christ places us on Himself, He "imposes" us on Himself, as Benedict writes: "*in sacris humeris suis dignaretur imponere*". Mercy, compassion, is a service, a making of oneself a servant, like the washing of the feet. There is no mercy without humility, without the sweet mildness of the heart of Christ, that teaches us to take His yoke, which is precisely the yoke of fraternal charity that bears the burdens of one another. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your life. For my yoke is sweet and my burden light." (Mt 11:29-30)

But all of this, Benedict writes, is to "bring back" the lost sheep to the flock. Mercy, as I was saying, *bears* in order to *bring back*. This means first of all that the patience of the Good Shepherd must help us to make a journey, a return journey to the flock, which also means returning to the Father, because the Father is the Master of the sheep, and to go back and stay within the flock means to come back and stay within the house of the Father. As Jesus expresses it in chapter 10 of John: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish in eternity; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all and no one can snatch them from the hand of the Father. I and the Father are one." (Jn 10:27-30)