



WORD FOR SUNDAY
Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday Readings: (R1) 8 Acts; 8-12. (R2) 1 Jn. 3:1-2. (R3) Jn. 10:11-18.

In Sunday's Gospel, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd is so consoling and comforting that it was sculptured on the walls of catacombs in times of persecution. However, this best-known and best-loved image means more than the usual stained-glass picture of a shepherd with a sheep in his arms. Rather it typifies the profound life-and-death struggle of Jesus and His intimate relationship with His disciples.

Unlike other shepherds, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, not just because He is kindly and gentle, but because "He lays down His life" for His sheep and not in His own defense. And He does this freely — "I lay down My life freely!" But His death saves, for He has power to pick up His life again.

Thus Peter affirms that the crippled man is saved by the name of Jesus (R1). St. John writes that those saved are called the children of God in this life and are destined to be like God in the unrevealed future life (R2). And Jesus Himself declares His relationship to His followers to be as intimate as that of a Palestinian shepherd with his sheep.

Most people readily accept the figure of Jesus as Good Shepherd. But I wonder how many have ever really experienced Him as such. This deep experience of God's love is often reserved to a chosen few. Some are those who have gone through the dark nights of the soul, like John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and other mystics. Others could well be those few, like the good thief and Mary Magdalene, who have been totally disillusioned and rejected by the hirelings and wolves — the world. This latter group no doubt is more familiar to us.

Perhaps we might consign to this group one of the bewildering sub-cultures of youth in the last decade, namely, the Jesus People. The simplicity of their message and their appearance, youth, background of drugs and permissiveness provoked the cynicism of a sophisticated world. Their placards bore the simple motto "Jesus saves." What was disconcerting about them was not their message nor their dress, but their irreverence.

Yet it should not surprise us that people, like the Jesus People, should turn to Jesus. Exploited by pushers, abandoned by society, unnerved by their own inadequacies, it is not surprising that they should "take refuge in the Lord." Because they have known the hired man so well, they can so easily recognize the Shepherd.

Are not all of us who have been sheltered in the warmth of human love in danger of being able to mouth only pretty metaphors about God? Are not our deeper insights so often second-hand, borrowed from the experience of a Prodigal Son or lost sheep, from a Mary Magdalene or a good thief? Did not our Lord say that harlots and sinners were closer to the Kingdom of God than the Scribes and Pharisees?

You know why? The sinners and the countless others unnoticed or forgotten by the world have nothing to lose by reaching out for God. The world's disapproval mattered little, for it had already rejected them as it did Christ. Following Christ made little new demands on them.

Maybe that is why the Jesus People disturbed us. Does world opinion matter much to us? Respectability more than dedication? Are we not con-

cerned that the world may acknowledge us for what we are rather than for what we profess to be? Have we ever felt the full fury of its rejection? If the Good Shepherd is just an image to us, these could be some of the reasons.

Of course, this does not mean we must stray from the fold to find the true Shepherd, or follow the path of the Prodigal to meet the Father. It does mean that our greatest energies should be spent, not in avoiding the rejection of the world, but in earning it by refusing to compromise Christian principles. The world rejects and the lost sheep have only one road to travel: it leads to God. For actually, the world's rejection is simply the Shepherd seeking the sheep.

All which I took from thee I did but take, Not for thy harms,

But just that thou might'st seek it in my arms.

Communist Nations Seen Still Persecuting Church

Rome [RNS] — Oppression of religion in Communist countries, though perhaps less blatant than before, continues to be an effective government policy, according to an editorial in the Rome Jesuit review, *Civiltà Catholica*.

Commenting on the reported Albanian execution of a Roman Catholic priest for baptizing a child, the editorial says that the "spiral of violence" continues in the "terrible drama" through which the Church as been living in Albania "ever since the end of the last World War."

"But," the editorial observes, "Albania is not an isolated case."

"There are other countries," the review claims, "in which the Church is persecuted or lacks the necessary freedom of religion to which it is entitled."

Referring specifically to countries "with Communist regimes" the Jesuit journal declares:

"If the situation vis-a-vis the Church in these countries has

improved somewhat, in comparison with former times, it would be an error to think that oppression had ended. On the contrary, it continues under more refined conditions — less noisy, but nonetheless quite efficient — through administrative measures aimed at the slow but sure destruction of religious life."

The *Civiltà Catholica* editorial claims that Communists in the West have "cleverly exploited" agreements between the Vatican

and some East European Communist countries, like Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, "to prove that religious persecution by Communist regimes is nonexistent."

"But the truth is quite different," the editorial affirms. "The Church has signed agreements and reached a modus vivendi with these regimes. But these do not allow for full freedom of religion; they simply enable the Church to survive."

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