

Now are you returned unto the shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

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We have been reminded this Easter that there is no Easter Joy without first the pain and tears of Good Friday. There is no rejoicing without the fear and depression of grief. There is no resurrection without the cross, and there will be no resurrection for us without bearing our crosses. And now that we have celebrated the Easter Feast, we are called to take up our crosses. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls His flock to follow Him. Instead of using a shepherd's crook, He leads us with His Cross, and He expects each one of us to take up our crosses and follow Him.

The disciple we associate most with running from the cross is St. Peter. We remember that during the drama of Good Friday, Peter denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had foretold. Peter abandoned Christ, he ran away and hid with the other disciples. Yet at the news of Easter Morning, he runs with St. John to find the tomb empty. He is the one who steps into the empty tomb to see for himself the discarded linen shroud. The Good Shepherd later appears to Peter, to his sheep who has gone astray and asks him three times, *Peter, do you love me? Yes, Lord,* And the Lord charges him, *Feed my sheep,* as if to say, *be not an hireling but a shepherd who cares and tends to the flock.* St. Peter was told then, *when you were young you walked wherever you went, but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.* Today's world would expect Jesus to say, *feed my sheep,* and you will have a fruitful and productive ministry, you will be a mega church pastor and can retire at 65 with a sizeable 401k. But St. Peter's shepherding ministry ends with his own crucifixion. He was bound and led to his cross and was crucified upside down. St. Peter accepted his cross, counting himself unworthy even to be crucified as our Lord was, and departed this life in suffering, for a world where there was no suffering. Yet through all the suffering that St. Peter endured the Good Shepherd never abandoned Him.

We too are bound like St. Peter, we stretch out our hands, and we are led where we would rather not go, and we are given a cross. What crosses have we been given to bear? Are they crosses of pain and suffering? Are they financial crosses or family crosses? Are they crosses of anger, illness, or addiction? Jesus says, *whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.* In the Imitation of Christ, we are encouraged along our way in following the Good Shepherd: Thomas a' Kempis writes, *Why are you afraid to take up your cross, since it is the only way to the kingdom of heaven? In the cross is salvation and life; in the cross is defense against our enemies. Through the cross heavenly*

sweetness is poured into our souls, our minds are strengthened, and we experience spiritual joy... Without the cross there is no salvation for our souls, nor hope of life eternal. Take your cross, then, and follow Jesus, and you will go into everlasting life. Remember that Jesus has gone before you bearing His cross and has given His life for you upon that cross, so that you may bear your own cross and long to die on it for love of Him. For if you die with Him, you will also live with Him; and if you have shared His suffering, you will also share His glory (Imitation of Christ, Pg. 92).

There is no other way to life, except by way of the cross. There is no other way, we must bear our burdens, we must take up what life has dealt us and offer it to the glory of God. The Imitation goes on to say, *You can go anywhere you will, seek whatever you wish, but you will not find a higher road above nor safer road below than the road of the holy cross. No matter how you plan things and arrange them to your liking, you still will find something to suffer, either willingly or unwillingly, and so you will always find the cross.* We must realize that there is no escaping the Good Shepherd and His cross. The Good Shepherd leaves the ninety and nine sheep for even the smallest lamb who goes astray. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep, knows all who are marked by the waters of Baptism, and desires that His flock will all be one, and that they will all follow Him to heaven.

Why does the Good Shepherd give us crosses? Many know the 23rd Psalm by heart, *the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...* but perhaps we only take at surface value the line *yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for Thy rod and staff comfort me.* To be comforted means to endure some form of suffering. The Good Shepherd allows us to go astray for a time, but He always comes after His lost sheep to bring them back into His fold. The Good Shepherd allows us to suffer because He wants us to grow to be more like Him. As hard as it is to hear, He wants us to grow through suffering the trial of the cross, so that we will learn we must submit entirely to Him. How will we ever learn about Christ, and what He suffered, if we do not suffer ourselves? The Good Shepherd knows His sheep, He knows exactly what his flock needs, He leads us beside the still waters, into green pastures, through the valley of the Shadow of Death. The Good Shepherd comforts and encourages us through it all, but we are not promised it will always be pleasant and comfortable.

We must take up our crosses willingly. We must go through the trial of the cross in order to go where there will be no suffering. The cross will take us to Christ, and Christ will take us to the resurrection and to heaven. The more that we are faithful in bearing our crosses, the more grace we are given. The Lord told St. Paul when he begged that his cross be taken away, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my*

strength is made perfect in weakness. Likewise, we will be made perfect in weakness, after all, the Lord has compared us to sheep, among the weakest of creatures. The Good Shepherd knows what is best for His sheep, and He has given each one of us a cross to bear, for the road to everlasting life is only by way of the Good Shepherd and His cross. Amen.