

Reflection: Who Is Your Good Shepherd?

"In our congregations many of us become shepherds for the children among us, complementing or supplementing a mother or father figure for the family."

Much research continues to be done on the spiritual life of the child. It becomes evident in my own observation and work with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd that children almost universally will connect the Good Shepherd figure with their own mother image. One girl expressed this in the atrium as she set aside the Good Shepherd figure and allowed her identified mother sheep to lead the others out of the sheepfold. In some cases, children make a verbal statement about this connection. Often it shows up in their drawings - in which the Good Shepherd holds the lamb, not on his broad shoulders, but as if carrying it in the "womb."

They are basically trying to convey the relationship of intimacy between the Shepherd and the sheep, and their own desire to be in close relationship with God. Could this be an unconscious memory of their own prenatal experience; an ultimate experience of closeness?

The Good Shepherd is a fine image to hold up as a symbol of motherhood. As it is one that is inclusive of all who are capable of nurturing, caring, loving, guiding, self-giving, forgiving and relational qualities. Mothers of children young and old. Fathers who rise to that responsibility with surprising skill. Aunts and uncles, and family friends who enter into trusting relationships. Goodness knows, our children need them all to survive in today's world. Don't we all!

In our congregations many of us become shepherds for the children among us, complementing or supplementing a mother or father figure for the family. It is particularly noticeable in "family size" congregations, but it's also the uniqueness and dedication of individuals who make up any parish family. This may be seen in how we prayer for one another - including our children and youth - in our daily prayers.

Even in Jesus' day he was bold to proclaim the role of others in this relationship to motherhood. Recorded in Luke 8, when told that his mother and brothers were looking for him, Jesus replied, "My mother and my brother are those who hear the Word of God and do it."

In the last chapter of John's Gospel there is that wonderful discourse in which Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter assures him three times, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." To which Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs, . . . tend my sheep, . . . feed my sheep."

This is the call to all of us who would follow Jesus - not only to be the sheep - but to tend and feed them as well. It is the imagery that the church has traditionally used for its leadership of bishops and clergy shepherding their flock in particular ways through sacramental and pastoral care. But is it not also the call of all persons who would follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd? All of us are to be like him - through the strengthening and guiding power of the Holy Spirit.

We both begin and end our journey in this life as helpless sheep in God's fold, and certainly, there are critical times of illness or crisis in between in which we might need to be fed and cared for by others. But generally we do become self-reliant along the way. While we come to Eucharist regularly to feed upon God's grace, we go away following the call to be intentional about the care and feeding of others - to be responsible shepherds for a hungry and hurting world.

Genelda Woggon has been ministered to and by children for over 40 years in her professional work as a Christian Formation Leader, most especially through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the past 20 years.