

## Good Shepherd: Falling in Love

By Mary Heinrich

One of the images found most often in the art of the catacombs is the Good Shepherd. The official website of San Callisto explains: “The Good Shepherd with a lamb around his shoulders represents Christ carrying the soul which He has saved. It is the most frequent symbol of Christ and the best loved by the early Christians. It had for them the same importance which the Crucifix has for us now.”<sup>1</sup> Before the catacombs, in Greek and Roman pagan art, the image of a sheep-bearer is a common scene. In ancient Christianity, we see in the Good Shepherd, a youthful Jesus depicted in rustic garb.

While in college, I had the opportunity to visit Chicago to see the *Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was my first trip to an art museum. There were several pieces that I simply fell in love with that day: Di Arezzo’s **St. Francis of Assisi**, da Flori’s frescos of the **Music Making Angels**, Barocci’s **The Rest on the Flight into Egypt** and simply anything by Fra Angelico. Little did I know that at this exhibit, I would also meet a sculpture that would have a profound impact the rest of my life.

I vaguely remember passing by the third century marble statue of the Good Shepherd. The image of the Good Shepherd had always been a favorite of mine, and I remember appreciating and enjoying the texture of the sheep’s wool and the Shepherd’s hair. The statue dates back to the year 290. It was reconstructed from thirty-four fragments found in the Domitilla Catacombs outside of Rome. The restoration includes the entire lower portion, up to the middle of the thighs, including the tree trunk that supports the statue, both arms and the right hand, and the back legs of the sheep. There have been repairs to the nose, the right brow and forehead, the hair, the upper and lower lip and the chin of the Shepherd. The sheep had repairs to its back of the head, ears and a small part of the tail. The statue is thought to be part of a column or a relief.<sup>2</sup>

We recognize Him as a shepherd because of his garment. He wears the *exomis* or tunic, a one shoulder, short garment tied with a belt. (*Exomis* is a greek word, “*exo*” means *outside* and “*omos*” means *shoulder*.) You notice on his left side hangs sheepskin bag that is attached to a long strap that suspends from his right shoulder.

He carries a sheep on his shoulders, holding its feet in his hands. The statue, boyish in appearance, depicts the Shepherd with no beard, only curly locks of hair that cascade

down to his shoulders.<sup>3</sup> It is believed to be the earliest known representation of a beardless Christ. The statue stands 39 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (100 cm) tall in its restoration. It was 21 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches preserved.

The Good Shepherd is the logo for the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, which is an approach to the religious formation of children. It is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. This particular image of the Good Shepherd was the first three dimensional image to be used by Jesus' followers in the early Church. It is the common image in the Roman catacombs. Patricia Coulter, archdiocese of Toronto shares, "Thus it is a radically "essential" image that so fittingly resonates with the "essentiality" of the catechesis."<sup>4</sup> As a catechist in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, I hold this image close to my heart. Through this method I have come to hear His voice and follow Him. It was a great joy to travel to Rome to see the original Good Shepherd statue. It can be found at the Vatican's Pio Cristiano Museum, its home since 1963. Prior to that, it was housed at the Lateran Palace. The statue of the Good Shepherd is a common image and can be found throughout Rome. A smaller version of the statue is available in shops around the Vatican; the image has been on Vatican currency, medals, postage stamps, postcards, posters as well as mementos sold at the catacombs. While it was a blessing to see the statue at the Vatican, it is an even greater joy to be with the child in the Atrium as they encounter the Good Shepherd and fall in love with Him.

*It is interesting to note that the Good Shepherd statue has been on display in 1946 and 1964 in New York City at the World's Fair. It has also traveled to Holland (1956), Germany and Belgium (1958).<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> "The Symbols," The Catacombs of St. Callixtus. Accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.catacombe.roma.it/it/simbologia.php>

<sup>2</sup> O' Neill, John P, ed. *The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982) , 219.

<sup>3</sup> O' Neill, John P, ed. *The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982) , 219.

<sup>4</sup> Coulter, Patricia, email conversation July 19, 2013

<sup>5</sup> Francis Cardinal Spellman, ed. "E-3 The Statue of the Good Shepherd," *Official Guide Book Vatican Pavilion New York World's Fair 1964-1965* (1964) : 18.