

The Good Shepherd

Acts 4: 8-12; I John 3:1-2; John 10: 11-18

May 7, 2006

Corporate systems and the policies of powerful countries cast aside people and cultures that don't fit into their projects. And yet with the turn of history those same castoffs become a fundamental factor in new social formations. "He is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone."

In the recent mass demonstrations of immigrants across the whole US, you saw banners bearing the legend: "We are part of the solution." But that wasn't the focus of North American legislators. The decisions of the majority of leaders exercising power in a country or in a community seldom respond to the reality of "minorities" (which in reality aren't minorities at all) and of the excluded. The leaders simply don't get to know those groups, and aren't interested in getting to know them. For only the will to stand in the shoes of the "others" and to empathize with their reality makes such understanding possible.

But if such a will were made concrete in a leader, he or she would be esteemed by those communities suffering repression and martyrdom.

Imagine: To realize that someone has gotten to know you personally and has put his or her life at risk for you... this realization would make you feel secure, and would motivate you to act with a spirit of liberty and maturity...

Such a relation between leader and people has a much deeper meaning than what a one-dimensional scientific assessment would attribute to "knowing." We are speaking of a relation in wholeness, not just that some things are known about the other person. The knowing we are talking about, the inter-personal relation implied by it, is sapiential. From it is born the experience of communion. Our whole life is involved in it.

Likewise to "know," in the meaning given the phrase in today's Gospel, "I know mine and mine know me"—this kind of knowing has three phases: first, "the acknowledgement of complicity in the conditions that have prevented the other person from becoming what God has intended the other person to be"; second, "the personal commitment to widen the conditions of the other's liberty"; and third, "taking active steps to realize that mission of liberation"—quoting Jesuit Father Ignacio Ellacuria, martyred in Sal Salvador in 1989. Clearly, far more is meant here than simply meeting the immediate needs of the other. Yes, meeting the other's basic needs is important. But more important still is unconditionally recognizing the other's humanity and acting in solidarity with the possibilities he or she possesses for becoming what he or she is and/or could be.

Every Christian community hopes to have a pastor like that!

In many Protestant and Pentecostal denominations the faithful explicitly call their leaders "pastors." Often there's a warm relationship between the pastor and members of the congregation. In communities of the Catholic tradition, by contrast, the title of pastor has often more to do with the "spiritual" care of the community. But in practice, it turns out to be difficult to include in this "spiritual" care those dimensions that the people are most concerned about. That is because the inner being of the real pastor has less to do with his or her playing an ecclesial role than with his or her embodying a dynamic initiative known as a "pastoral service of solidarity."

The "good shepherd" in this sense refers not just to exceptional individuals like

the El Salvadoran Bishop Romero or Mother Theresa of Calcutta. It refers just as much to all those unsung men and women who commit the totality of their lives to defending the integral dignity of their people. Only those who are not “hired men” can make themselves available to the vulnerable.

Nor is the “good shepherd” a role played by only one person. Inspired by a “pastoral service of solidarity” during raids by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), the members of our local migrant community act as “good shepherds” of each other, keeping each other informed by telephone when they see agents of “la migra” driving around or near their dwellings. A “pastoral” network quickly develops that proves effective in helping each other avoid being arrested.

Each believer in such a network lives in trust that Jesus has taken his or her side. Even though Jesus has not yet fully manifested himself, his presence is already real and alive in each believer’s being, thanks to believers’ “pastoral service of solidarity” with and for each other.