



PONTIFICIA  
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*Istituto di Antropologia*

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### **Meditation on Matthew 18:12-14**

Who really is the sheep in today's Gospel that is separated from the flock, abandoned and lonely, and for which the shepherd searches so intensively to bring back to safety? If we take a look at the context of today's passage, we see that it speaks of children, who are to serve as role models for adults ('become like children', Matthew 18:3), and of little ones, to whom no one should give offence (Matthew 18:6) and whom no one should despise (Matthew 18:10). These passages are referred to time and again when it comes to emphasising the sinful and culpable failure of the church towards those affected by abuse on a spiritual level on the one hand and, on the other, to motivate the church community to take appropriate preventative action with the words of Jesus with a view to the future and prevention of such abuse.

Against this background, it does not seem far-fetched to answer the question of who the sheep separated from the flock is in today's Gospel. Quite clearly in this way: it also refers to those affected by abuse, who, as a result of the abuse and the subsequent treatment of them, have not only lost contact with the flock, the community of believers, but have rather been pushed out of this community through disregard, defensiveness, silence and the like. In this respect, the shepherd's joy over the recovered sheep reflects the emotional state of those episcopal shepherds who, despite all the problematic history, difficulties and various obstacles, have set out to pursue those affected by abuse, to meet them, to enter into dialogue with them and to invite them into the community of believers as a valued member and, if you like, to prepare the way for them.

You might be tempted to think that at this point, everything has been said about today's passage and that the meditation can now be concluded. But that is not the case. Why? Because today's passage in the Gospel according to Matthew is often confused with another one. It is the one in the 15th chapter of Luke's Gospel, verses 1-7, where there is also talk of a sheep separated from the flock, but the context is completely different. This is not about the little ones, the children, to whom no one should give offence, but about sinners. The sheep separated from the flock stands for the sinner who has excluded himself from the community of the righteous through his culpable behaviour. We are therefore dealing here with an image (flock and sheep separated from it) that presents two almost contradictory statements: on the one hand, the innocent sheep and, on the other, the guilty one, or, in the context of the topic of abuse, the abused person and the perpetrator.

Basically, we couldn't care less. Why not use the same image of the reunification of the part and the whole for two different situations? After all, the Christian faith is always about maintaining or restoring unity, about keeping the members of the one body of Christ together. That may well be true. But there is this one crucial difference that can easily be overlooked if the idea of unity is overemphasised without any differentiation. There is a difference between a perpetrator who has become guilty and is accepted back into the community and a person who has been abused by the perpetrator and who wants to be in

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contact with this community again, even though they may have been wronged by this community when it first came to recognising them as affected.

With regard to the person affected by abuse, it is primarily the community's responsibility to do justice to them, to support them in dealing with the consequences of abuse and to open all conceivable paths and doors back into the community of the church. With regard to the perpetrator, this community of the Church must ensure that the perpetrator, first of all, recognises and acknowledges the seriousness of their guilt, shows a willingness to make fundamental changes and is prepared to atone and repent. Only then is it possible to discuss returning to the community and consider resocialisation. Far too often, those responsible in the church have acted quite differently in this regard; offenders have been reinstated after half-hearted warnings without serious consequences for them personally and with a view to coming to terms with their offences. Those already affected by the offences were given just as little consideration as those who are in danger of being abused by this offender in the future, because they are a repeat offender.

Under the guise of misunderstood compassion, the difficult and conflict-laden handling of offenders and their offences was avoided. The decisive passage in the parable in Luke 15:3-7 was simply overlooked. The joy of finding and bringing back the lost sheep, which stands for the sinner, has an essential prerequisite, namely repentance (Luke 15:7). This cannot consist of simple lip service, which is then simply accepted by church leaders in the belief that this has resolved a case of abuse. Something else is needed. We need just mercy and merciful justice with regard to perpetrators and those affected by their actions. This will not come easily. It requires an honest struggle.

### **Prayer**

Lord our God, our lives are sometimes difficult and complex. We find it difficult to make the right decisions, to stick to these decisions consistently and to act accordingly. Show us the way and help us not to stray from it.

### **Question**

When dealing with cases of abuse, what can I do to ensure that justice and mercy come together? How do I ensure that justice is not realised at the expense of mercy and mercy not at the expense of justice?

