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The Shepherd's Burden - Balancing Faith and Patience

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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The Shepherd's Burden - Balancing Faith and Patience

**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ**

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Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for September 12, 2010 for Cycle C:
Ex 32:7-14, Ps 51, 1 Tim 1:12-17, Lk 15:1-32

THE SHEPHERD'S BURDEN - BALANCING FAITH AND PATIENCE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

As we move from summer leisure to the renewed demands of school and parish activities, the Church provides an occasion for reflecting on our spiritual education and growth.

As educators in the faith, priests must see to it, either by themselves or through others, that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to a development of their own vocation as required by the Gospel, to a sincere and active charity, and to that freedom whereby Christ has made us free. Ceremonies however beautiful, or associations however flourishing, will be of little value if they are not directed toward educating people in the attainment of Christian maturity (Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Ministry of Priests* #6).

The liturgical worship and the various ministries exercised in a parish are indeed the exercise of that service of God and neighbor demanded by the Creator and the Gospel. But do they also lead to spiritual growth? There is no measuring of success by human standards and this may bring the active person to an experience of frustration. We all like to see results for our labors, and -- at least once in a while, to receive some recognition for our efforts! Purifying our motives is a lifelong task. Just as it is discouraging for parents and teachers when children make serious errors of judgment, so is it disappointing when many parishioners do not seem to follow aspects of the Church's proclamation of the Gospel message. Some religious leaders might be tempted to move to a community that would probably be more receptive.

However, Moses, Jeremiah and other prophets learned that the spiritual shepherd must be both faithful to God and patiently loyal to a wayward flock. The Book of Exodus recounts the foundation of Israel's life in the Covenant as a marvelous experience of God's presence (Ex 19:3-25). Then they received the commandments that emphasized exclusive fidelity to this God. But when Moses seemed to delay in returning from the mountain top, the people persuaded Aaron to construct an image for them to worship. Woe to the shepherd who listens to the whims and fancies of his flock!

The selection proclaimed in the Sunday liturgy shows that God put Moses to a test. "Go down at once to your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, for they have become depraved" (Ex 32:8). God seemed to dissociate himself from the people, even threatening to destroy them. "Then I will make of you a great nation!" (32:10). How tempting it is for pastors, parents and teachers to opt for a fresh start!

Moses, however, was quite mature and he knew that he was but God's servant in leading the people out of Egyptian slavery. "Why, O LORD, should your wrath blaze up against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt...?" (32:11). Thus did Moses withstand God in the

breach (Ps 106:23) because the pastor is not only leader and teacher but also intercessor for his flock. The Church today pleads for her wayward members in union with Christ, the good Shepherd.

The Master reached out especially to those labeled as sinners, and indeed some of them were like the prodigal of his parable. To what ends he would go to bring the weak, the witless and the wayward back to union with his heavenly Father! The prodigal son found many with whom to share his wealth, but no one remembered him when he was reduced to penury. His conversion began with a confession to God ("Heaven") and his father because sin disrupts all relationships. He would ask only to be servant in his father's household, but paternal love was the basis for full reconciliation and rejoicing. Such is the mystery of God's love in sending his only Son to bring humanity back, not merely to divine service, but to an incredible intimacy within the mystery of God.

What of the faithful who never seem to stray? Indeed many wonderful people are evidence that the powerful grace of God in baptism accomplishes marvels. Perhaps some might feel a twinge of jealousy when God lavishes love on the repentant sinners. Do we refuse to join the celebration because God does not seem to treat us as well? "Lead us, Lord, to sincere and active charity, and show us the dimensions of that freedom whereby Christ has made us free!"