

What do you see when you hear the word “Church”? What comes to mind when we talk about the disciples of Jesus Christ? You might have in your mind a picture of the Holy Father walking alone on the streets of Rome, or a great crowd at the spectacular Masses celebrated in open fields, or cardinals and bishops at the great liturgies in beautiful cathedrals. You could also see people gathered in the most remote places on the planet to pray in an amazing variety of languages: small communities of South America; colorful Masses in Africa that last all day; hidden communities of China; or intensely quiet Latin liturgies of Europe. You may also see teachers in their classrooms; or men and women caring for the poor; politicians struggling to draft legislation and trying to convince others to implement them into law. You might even see great universities and classrooms and fat books in huge libraries that contain the astonishing treasure of what we call Christian culture. Sadly, you could possibly also see sinners: confused bishops, bad priests, unfaithful spouses, unkind parents, ungrateful children and the whole drama of sin played in human hearts. All of those images, and many others we can conjure, add up to what we call the Church. The Church as we see it.

How does God see the Church? Wouldn't that be interesting to know? He paints for us a different image: “Whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” Why would the sheep listen to the shepherd? How do they know his voice? It must be something very profoundly familiar that makes them follow him. Something so deeply hidden in the sheep that they might not even be aware of its existence. Something that touches the very origin of their life. Yes, it is the voice of the Creator. The shepherd who calls them out of the fold and whom they follow is the one who speaks with the voice of the Creator. They recognize him because they were called to life by him and they follow him. Because of the unity of the Shepherd and the Creator, the voice the sheep hear leads them to greater freedom and to abundance of life. Those who follow him, those who recognize his voice, become like beacons that reflect the light. They allow the voice of the shepherd to be heard even wider. Those who don't listen to the shepherd dampen his voice. Christ enters the sheep's world through the gate of his humanity; he is the gate and the shepherd. In the astonishing gift, he gives the sheep his life: he protects them, he heals them, and he revives them by his presence.

And now the really surprising point: To understand the Church truly, we must superimpose God's vision of the Church on what we see. As the Church is the spiritual body of Christ, all the structures and all the cathedrals and classrooms are not the Church, if they are not following the voice of the shepherd, if they do not have life from that voice. If they hear his voice, those seemingly human institutions, big or small, beautiful or ugly become the true source of life. Then it is not hard to distinguish the thief from the shepherd. The mark of the Good Shepherd is the fruit: the echo of His voice, the light of life that is being transmitted; no matter what robes they are wearing or what buildings they use. If you allow those images to always dwell together in your heart, you will see fulfillment of the vision that Jesus offered to the Pharisees. “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”