

## Our Lady Mother of the Good Shepherd



On the Saturday before the feast day of the Good Shepherd (presently the IV Sunday of Easter) we celebrate the feast of the Mother of the Good Shepherd (aka Divine Shepherdess), a Capuchin devotion of Spanish origin, which has been for more than a century the patroness of all Capuchin missions throughout the world.

## Origin of the Devotion

In the year 1703, Br. Isidore of Sevilla, a great popular preacher, was inspired to be accompanied in his mission by a banner with a particular representation of the Virgin Mary: dressed with the humble clothes of a shepherdess, sitting on a rock, under a tree, wearing an ordinary wide-brimmed hat (sombbrero), and with some lambs portrayed around her. Certainly, this image was in stark contrast to numerous exuberant images of the Virgin used at the time, represented with very sumptuous costumes, splendid crowns and imposing thrones. The Capuchin preacher could sense that the simplicity of the Mother of God, so close to all of her children—and especially her concern for the estranged sheep—would give to his words a particular success and



additional help to touch hearts to come back to God. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned indeed took place and the devotion to the "Shepherdess of souls", which popularly became known as the "Divine Shepherdess", expanded rapidly with the creation of many groups of the faithful linked to her throughout Spain. They became known as *Mary's Flock*. Obviously, there were those that could not accept to see Our Lady represented in such a manner, so poor and simple (saying that "her clothing had no decorum, was indecent and impure"), but the popular sentiment that rapidly became identified with this new version of the Mother of mercy triumphed, wining over people's hearts.

## Ecclesial approval

Friar Isidore attempted to obtain ecclesiastical approval for this devotion in many ways. He received from Pope Clement IX (1700-1721) two bulls that granted, on the one hand, that the altar where the image of the Divine Shepherdess was venerated should be a privileged altar, and on the other, that the fraternities of "*Mary's Flock*" receive all the indulgences and privileges that were granted to other such associations. The bull, however, did not explicitly approve the devotion.



With his death, which occurred in 1750, for some years this devotion was in a certain sense orphaned. However, it found in Blessed Diego de Cádiz (1743-1801) a fiery propagator, who claimed that he received the gift of preaching through the Divine Shepherdess. He was responsible for writing the appropriate liturgical texts for the celebration of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours for this devotion. These writings received the approval of Pope Pius VI in 1795, thus sealing the devotion canonically. As a result, the Spanish Capuchins were now able to celebrate each year the liturgical recurrence of the feast of the Divine Shepherdess on the eve of Good Shepherd Sunday, which at the time was the second Sunday after Easter.

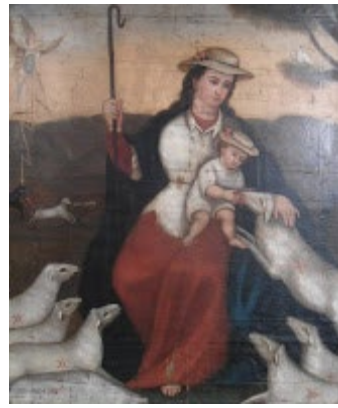
In 1798, also as part of the efforts of Blessed Diego, a decree of the provincial leadership ordered the placement of her image in all the churches of the Order and proclaimed her the patron of the Spanish Capuchin missions. Her devotion spread throughout Spain, through the missions in Latin America and also in many parts of Italy that were under Spanish influence. In 1885, Pope Leo XIII extended this feast day to the entire Order.

Furthermore, some new female congregations were founded with strong ties to this devotion: *Capuchin Sisters of the Mother of the Divine Shepherd* (Blessed José Tous y Soler, ofmcap); *Capuchin Tertiaries of the Divine Shepherdess* (fr. Pedro de Llisá, ofmcap); *Franciscan Tertiaries of the Divine Shepherdess* (Blessed M. Ana Mogas); *Congregation of Mary's Flock* (Francisco de Asís Medina); *Piarist Congregation of Religious, Daughters of the Divine Shepherdess* (Fr. Faustino Miguel, Piarist). We cannot help but notice that Capuchin holiness in Spain also finds a close relationship to this beautiful devotion.



## Patroness of all Capuchin missions

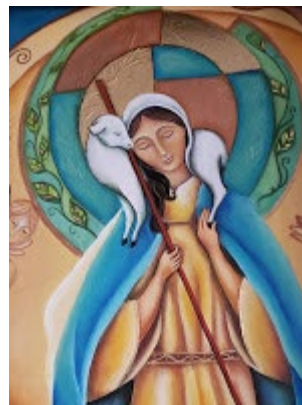
With the approval of the General Chapter of 1932, the Mother of the Good Shepherd was declared the universal patron of all the missions of the Capuchin Order on May 22—and continues to be to so the present day. In fact, the current Constitutions approved on October 4, 2013, affirm in number 181.3: “We entrust this great undertaking to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, **Mother of the Good Shepherd**, who gave birth to Christ, the light and salvation of all nations, and who, on the morning of Pentecost, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, presided in prayer at the dawn of evangelization.”



It seems, however, that very few of our missions, with the exception of those of Spanish origin, have come to know this devotion and enjoy its patronage. It would certainly be worthwhile to spread it more widely in all of our missions. The Mother of the Good Shepherd can be a light, a support and a stimulus in our missionary work; since it is precisely a Capuchin devotion, she bears the traces of our character, and thus can help us to be more authentic.

## Mother of the Good Shepherd or Divine Shepherdess?

Originally, she was simply called “Pastora”—*the Shepherdess*—by Friar Isidore. With time, however, the faithful would later annex the title of *Divine Shepherdess*. Moreover, the child Jesus was not portrayed in the original image either. But in the decades that followed, new representations of the devotion started depicting the Child Jesus as part of the image, thus emphasizing that she was the *Mother of the Good Shepherd*.



Generally speaking, highly educated people and theologians tend to favor the title *Mother of the Good Shepherd*, even though the Church already, in some pronouncements, previously used “Divine Shepherdess.” The people of God, however, neither felt the need to change her name nor accepted the arguments put forth to do so. They always have and continue to call her “The Divine Shepherdess”—not because they believed that she was a goddess, a deity (everyone knows perfectly who she is: the Mother of Jesus, the Good Shepherd), but because they understand that her action, her service, is divine. By collaborating with God's project, her action becomes divine, and that is why she is affectionately called “*Divine Shepherdess*.”

## A Capuchin Virgin

Let us now reflect on some of the original characteristics of the image of the Divine Shepherdess and interpret them from the lens of our Capuchin charism and our values. It is important that we have in mind here the original illustration of the image because, with the passing of the centuries and the growth of devotion, sometimes details were added that in a certain sense obscured its original simplicity.



The first thing that catches our attention is her **poverty**: she is dressed like the poor shepherds, with a simple peasant hat. At our present time, perhaps as a result of Vatican II, it could seem normal for us to see her portrayed in a manner so similar to the simple people. If we take into account, however, that back then the culture of the time was fixated on the pompous and the excessively ornate, to propose an image of the Blessed Virgin like this was an intuition nothing short extraordinary, as if almost recalling the words of Francis of Assisi: “and we desired nothing more...”. This made and still makes us think of her as a Mother that is extremely close to us, selfless, standing in solidarity with her children. She invites us Capuchins to understand the beauty of being poor, of being content with having little, to think of a pastoral approach carried out much more from the heart than depending on powerful means.

She draws our attention to her **minority**: she is sitting on a stone under a tree. She is the Queen of Heaven and Earth, but she does not have a throne. She is comfortable on a stone and seeks the simple protection of a tree. Certainly, this is not because she was not deserving or was not able to find other amenities and privileges. Rather, it was because she happily chose to stay close to the herd.



Being surrounded by sheep suggests to us that she gives birth to **fraternity**. The Virgin Mary is a gatherer. Just as in Pentecost she seems to gather the apostles in prayer, she continues in history, as our Mother, to generate brotherhood among us, collaborating in our unity.

The fact that she is seated makes us think that she is also **contemplative**. Those who work in herding know that there are times of activity, of herding the flock, of searching for waters and pastures, but there are also many times that one can sit down and

contemplate, patiently waiting for the sheep to be satisfied. However, this is not an alienating contemplation. Even though she thinks about the mystery of life, she is always attentive to the flock, ready to intervene immediately when needed.



We can see in her a woman in **harmony with creation**. She uses what she needs from the world: she is dressed in sheepskin, she is sitting under a tree, she leads the herd to food and water supplies—and yet she maintains a respectful relationship with nature. The shepherd is always very clear that his life depends on natural resources and that is why he cannot abuse them or get more out of them than can be naturally produced.

Being a shepherdess tells us about the importance of **simple work**. She reminds us that work is a grace, not a punishment. It is part of our spirituality. Our Capuchin saints show us that there is no Capuchin holiness without work. Manual work, discreet work, and any kind of work that perhaps others do not want to do, are for us an occasion of encounter, growth, communion and service.

And finally, the Shepherdess of souls is a **missionary**. She comes to support the Capuchin missions and from the very beginning she fulfills her mission. She watches over us so that we never lose this ideal, so that we do not ever abandon pastoral care, so that we are not insensitive when we find sheep that are on the way of getting lost. Instead, she encourages us to fulfill what the Good Shepherd expects of us with a creativity that is ever renewed.



In light of all these details, we can look at this devotion as an authentic Capuchin representation of the mystery of the Mother of God. Keeping her present and venerating her in all our missions can be a precious way of helping us grow in fidelity to our vocation.

Br Mariosvaldo Florentino, ofmcap

Secretary General of the Capuchin Missions

Translated by br. Diogo Escudero

## Sources:

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Throughout the centuries, artists and popular piety were able to present her to us in many ways, showing to us how much this Marian devotion is alive ...







