The Shepherd

Kathryn Burnett*
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by Kathryn Burnett
Sociology, Jr.

THE RUSTIC atmosphere, the quietness, the awareness of companions in worship helped prayer to come easily. The love of God is universal. The church is universal. The mass was in Spanish and the sacraments were of another faith, but I understood. One doesn’t need to know words in church if one comes to worship. The quiet atmosphere was overflowing with peace—a peace reflected in the restful expressions gazing up at the crucifix or lowered in meditation.

The voice of the chanter resounded in the vault of stone, sounding as though it came from the heavens above. The massive darkwood front of the altar area was graced by the crucifix, and flowers and candles shared their beauty with each other. Behind a long table draped in white and green stood the priest giving the Instructional. At his side, and dressed in white robes was the altar boy, head bowed, listening intensely as the priest talked. I listened too, to the musical inflections of the Spanish language, snatching words where I could.

Then came the Offertory. Young men passed down the aisle with collection plates, and pesos clinked together as people gave what they could. Several people slipped quietly to the confessionals, heads bowed, mantillas moving softly.

Around me were Mexican peasants—a hard-working people with no money to spare. They were dressed in their best for Sunday . . . threadbare suits, shoes instead of sandals, hair combed and oiled, mantillas falling gracefully over the shoulders of the women. A good people. I listened
as *pesos* clinked against *pesos* and watched the priest prepare for Communion.

How fine the priest appeared—how powerful he was in the eyes of his people. The shepherd and his flock. He was draped in white and green and his skin was fine and soft, not typical for rural Mexico. His fingers as he prepared Communion were slender and graceful, moving delicately over the sacraments, aware of the eyes watching them. His ring sparkled in the candlelight as he took the silver tray from the altar boy.

His face was rapt with his involvement in his preparation. He looked nowhere but at the sacraments in his hands. His flocks watched, seemingly aware only of the sacraments being prepared by their shepherd.

Delicately he broke the bread and ate. Then lifting the chalice of wine he turned to his flock. The high point of the mass was reached. The sacraments had been changed to the body and blood of Christ. Prayerfully the people arose and began to move silently to the altar rail. Hands folded, heads down, they approached the priest, crossing themselves.

They stood earnestly as he moved to the first person in the line and slipped the Host into his mouth. "Body of Christ." The power of the priest's words reached every ear in the church.

"Amen," answered the man.

Down the line the shepherd moved, administering the Host to his flock, the altar boy following with the tray. "Body of Christ."

"Amen."

At the end of the line was a small man I hadn't noticed before. A stranger, perhaps. He stood a little behind the others, head bowed and hands clasped tightly before him. He shifted from one foot to another uncomfortably as the priest moved along the worshipers towards him. Strange that I hadn't seen him before—he must have been in the confessional and just then come forward to take Communion.

He was not dressed as the others. He wore a heavy wool poncho and, while clean, his pants were patched and drawn tight above the ankle in the style of the highlands. His hair
was long—ear length—straight and unkempt; he wore sandals instead of shoes. Yet it was not his dress as much as his physical features that marked him as unusual.

He could not have been more than thirty, but he seemed old. His face was bronzed and roughened from exposure and his eyes were brown pools of timidity. His fingers were short and thick, twisted around each other so tightly that they were purple. I watched him there, behind the others, and then I knew who he was. He was a shepherd from the highlands, and was in the village for such business as poor shepherds must keep.

I realized suddenly that the priest had passed on to the next part of the service without offering the Host to the shepherd. The shepherd realized it also—he looked up in confusion, the color rising in his face. Perhaps the priest had not seen him, for he was standing somewhat behind the others. But the open-eyed altar boy had seen. He touched the robes of the priest lightly and whispered to him, pointing to the shepherd standing before the altar.

The priest turned slowly and beheld the shepherd. Timidly the shepherd looked up into the face of the priest, trembling, waiting to partake of the Host. For a moment they looked at each other, and then the priest turned to the altar, lifting the chalice. Carefully he wiped the bread from the tray into the chalice, and without a glance at the shepherd raised the Host to his lips and drank it. Covering the chalice, he placed it on its stand and delicately cleaned his fingers. The altar boy knelt at his side, head bowed, as people silently began to move to their seats.

The shepherd had watched stunned, despair and humiliation on his face. Quickly he looked around to see if anyone had been watching and then, head bowed and lips tight, he followed the last of the worshipers from the rail, looking neither left nor right. I lowered my eyes to the blurring prayer book in my hands. God, bless the shepherds.

Amen.