

Flocking together: John 10:1-10

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by [Edgardo Antonio Colon-Emeric](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

Good shepherd Sunday! The imagery in the readings is beautiful and triumphant, a fitting trumpeting of Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil. The foreboding passion sayings are past, the betrayals have been left behind. Jesus is the good shepherd and we are his flock, the sheep of his pasture. Jesus has proven his love for us by giving his life for us, and we show our love for Jesus by listening to his voice and no other. He leads us to gentle pastures where we might have life in abundance, and we return our gratitude by following him. There is something deeply moving and reassuring about the shape of the Christian community that emerges from these readings: a community founded on and held together by love. But where is this flock?

Recent Latino and Latina immigrants to the U.S. are often startled by the wealth of churches in this country. Both the number and size of congregations can be striking for people accustomed to a Catholic world that has only in recent decades been broken by a Pentecostal beachhead. Whereas the dividing lines in Latin America tend to be drawn in stark hues (*católico* and *no católico*), in the U.S. the dividing lines separate flock from flock—those who belong to Pastor Marcos, say, from those who belong to Pastor Luis.

In my experience, this diversity of flocks has led to a stunning paradox. The more the churches multiplied in the area I served—I counted nine within a three-block radius and three in one building—the weaker the church's witness became. The more I and members of my congregation visited door to door to preach the good news and invite people to repentance, or at least to church, the more resistant people became because another evangelist had been there not ten minutes before! In short, the bleating of divided congregations has turned unbelievers into savvy consumers ("What does your church offer me?") and pastors into peddlers of the gospel. Like Jacob, they resort to various techniques in order to trick their uncle Laban out of his sheep.

Of course, Jesus warned us that the road would be difficult. His little flock would be frequently assaulted by thieves and misled by hirelings. He even prepared us for the likelihood that there would be not a few goats mixed in among the sheep. But I see nothing in what Jesus said or did that prepared us for the scattering of the flock into denominations. On the contrary, he explicitly says, "There will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16).

This is not a cheery thing to say during the Great Fifty Days of Easter, a time of feasting not fasting, a time for alleluias not *mea culpa*. But when Christians cannot even agree on the date of Easter, it seems that something has gone terribly wrong. We are told that the disciples did not understand Jesus' figure of the flock and the shepherd, and neither do I. What is Jesus talking about? Does Jesus have a demon? Is he out of his mind? Where is the flock that Jesus speaks of?

I am convinced that the flock that Jesus so lovingly describes in the Gospel of John is the same flock that is divided today. There is no other true church behind, above or inside the legion of Christian communities scattered across the earth.

The Good Shepherd calls on Christians of all stripes to follow him, not out of fear of bandits or from frustration with hirelings, but out of love. Founded by the love of the shepherd for the sheep, the church is held together by the love of the sheep for the shepherd and for each other. It is for this reason that schism has long been labeled a sin against love, and why without love, all other marks of the church are like a noisy gong or a clashing cymbal. In short, the way to unity and fidelity is the way of love.

Mind you, the way of love is hard, first of all because love does not seem to be enough. This is particularly the case in the church, where the word is bandied about so carelessly that its currency has been devalued. Sayings that were perhaps once powerful (“They won’t care how much you know till they know how much you care”) have become trite and banal. But the love is not just any kind of love; it is a love that originates in God’s own Trinitarian love. We love because he first loved us.

Second, the way of love is hard because it is long. How much easier to climb into the sheepfold by another way! But there are no techniques and methods that will open the gate or bring in the sheep. Getting to know and love the voice of Jesus takes time.

Finally, the way of love is hard because it requires one’s all. Peter’s commission to feed Jesus’ sheep was contingent on his threefold declaration of love for Jesus, a love that would require that he be willing to lay down his life. Has not the world seen a living witness of this in the person of John Paul II? When he was younger, he used to fasten his own belt and go wherever he wished. But now that he has grown old, he stretches out his hands and someone else fastens a belt around him and takes him where he does not wish to go. Shepherds like him and others, who have staked all for the sake of gospel, are believable not because of their rank but because of their love.

Where is this flock? Wherever there are sheep walking with the Good Shepherd in the way of love.