

## Historic Commentary

(Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

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### Commentary on John 10:11-18 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 10](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Augustine](#): Above he said that the good Shepherd entered through the door. If he is the Door, how does he enter through himself? ... Just as he knows the Father through himself and we know the Father through him, so he enters into the fold through himself and we enter through him. Through Christ we [pastors] have a door of entrance to you; and why? Because we preach Christ and therefore enter in through the door. But Christ preaches Christ too because he preaches himself; and so the Shepherd enters in through himself.... He is also the door to the Father, for there is no way of approach to the Father except through him.... And indeed brothers and sisters, because he is the Shepherd, he has permitted his members to bear the office of shepherd. Both Peter and Paul and all the other apostles were shepherds: all good bishops are shepherds. But none of us calls himself the door.

[Gregory the Great](#): He whose goodness is his own nature and not some nonessential gift, says, "I am the good Shepherd." He adds the character of this goodness, which we are to imitate, saying, "The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He did what he taught; he gave an example of what he commanded. The good Shepherd has laid down his life for his sheep in order to change his body and blood into a sacrament for us and to satisfy the sheep he had redeemed with his own body as food. The way of contempt for death that we are to follow has been shown us, the mold that is to form us is there. The first thing we are to do is to devote our external goods to his sheep in mercy. Then, if it should be necessary, we are to offer even our death for these same sheep.... If someone does not give his substance to the sheep, how can he lay down his life for them?

[Basil of Seleucia](#): For the sake of his flock the shepherd was sacrificed as though he were a sheep. He did not refuse death. He did not destroy his executioners as he had the power to do, for his passion was not forced on him. He laid down his life for his sheep of his own free will. "I have the power to lay it down," he said, "and I have the power to take it up again." By his passion he made atonement for our evil passions, by his death he cured our death, by his tomb he robbed the tomb, by the nails that pierced his flesh he destroyed the foundations of hell. Death held sway until Christ died. The grave was bitter, our prison

was indestructible, until the Shepherd went down and brought to his sheep confined there the good news of their release. His appearance among them gave them a pledge of their resurrection and called them to a new life beyond the grave. “The good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” and so seeks to win their love.

**Clement of Alexandria:** “I will be their shepherd,” he says, “and I will be close to them,” as clothing to their skin. He desires to save my flesh by clothing it in the robe of immortality, and he has anointed my body. “They shall call on me,” he says, and I will answer, “Here I am.” Lord, you have heard me more quickly than I ever hoped! “And if they pass over they shall not fall, says the Lord,” meaning that we who are passing over into immortality shall not fall into corruption, for he will preserve us. He has said he would, and to do so is his own wish. Such is our Teacher, both good and just. He said he had not come to be served but to serve, and so the Gospel shows him tired out, he who labored for our sake and promised “to give his life as ransom for many,” a thing that, as he said, only the good Shepherd will do.

**Tertullian:** Why, a shepherd like this would be kicked off the farm! The wages held for him until the time of his discharge would be kept from him as compensation! In fact, the master’s losses would need to be compensated from this shepherd’s savings.

**Augustine:** Who then is the hireling? There are some in office in the church, of whom the apostle Paul says, “Who seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ’s.” What does that mean, “who seek their own”? It means those who do not love Christ freely, who do not seek after God for his own sake. It means those who are pursuing temporal advantages, gaping for gain, coveting honors from people. When such things are loved by an overseer, and this is why they serve God, whoever does this is a hireling who cannot count himself among the children. For of such also the Lord says, “Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.” Listen to what the apostle Paul says of Timothy: “But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy shortly to you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your circumstances; for I have no man like-minded, who will naturally care for you. For all seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ’s.”

**Gregory the Great:** There is another wolf that ceaselessly, everyday, tears apart minds, not bodies. This is the evil spirit that goes about attacking the sheepfolds of believers, seeking the death of souls. Of this wolf it is said, “And the wolf snatches and scatters the sheep.” The wolf comes, and the hireling flees. The evil spirit tears apart the minds of believers in temptation, and the one holding the place of shepherd does not take responsibility. Souls are perishing, and he enjoys earthly advantages. The wolf snatches and scatters the sheep when he entices one to drunkenness, inflames another with greed, exalts another by pride, destroys another by anger, stirs one up by envy, trips up another by deceit. When the devil slays believers through temptations, he is like a wolf dispersing the flock. No zeal rouses the hireling against these temptations, no love excites him. He seeks only the outward advantages and carelessly allows the inward injury to his flock.

**Gregory the Great:** But we cannot truly know whether anyone is a shepherd or a hireling if there is no occasion to test him. During times of peace even a hireling frequently stands for the protection of the flock like a true shepherd. When the wolf comes, each one shows what his intention was as he stood as protector of the flock.

**Cyril of Alexandria:** Humanity, having yielded to an inclination for sin, wandered away from love toward God. On this account we were banished from the sacred and divine fold, I mean the realm of paradise. Having been weakened by this calamity, we became the prey of two bitter and merciless wolves: namely, the devil who had beguiled humanity to sin; and death, which had been born from sin. But when Christ was announced as the good Shepherd over all, in the struggle with this pair of wild and terrible beasts, he laid down his life for us. He endured the cross for our sakes that by death he might destroy death. He was condemned for our sakes that he might deliver all of us from condemnation for sin, abolishing the tyranny of sin by means of faith and “nailing to his cross the bond that was against us,” as it is written. Accordingly, the father of sin used to put us “in hades like sheep,” delivering us over to “death as our shepherd,” according to what is said in the Psalms. But the truly good Shepherd died for our sakes, that he might take us out of the dark pit of death and prepare to enfold us among the companies of heaven and give to us mansions above, even with the Father, instead of dens situated in the depths of the abyss or the recesses of the sea. Therefore Jesus says to us, “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

**Augustine:** Suppose someone has sinned—grievously sinned. He ought to be rebuked, excommunicated. However, if he is excommunicated, he will become an enemy and will plot and do as much harm as he can. And so, for the time being, the pastor who seeks his own and not what is Christ’s keeps quiet and does not reprove the person so that he will not have to put up with the annoyances of their attacks or lose what he truly follows after—the advantage of human friendship. But look! The wolf has caught a sheep by the throat; the devil has enticed a believer into adultery. And yet, you are silent—you do not censure. As a hireling, you have seen the wolf coming, and you fled. Perhaps you answer and say, “See, I am here: I have not fled.” You have fled because you have been silent; you have been silent because you are afraid.

**Gregory the Great:** The wolf too comes upon the sheep whenever any unrighteous person oppresses the humble believers. The one who only appears to be a shepherd leaves the sheep and flees because he is too afraid to resist the wolf’s violence from fear of danger to himself. He flees not by moving to another place but by withholding consolation from his flock. The one who conceals himself beneath his silence is the one who flees.... The hireling is inflamed with no enthusiasm to fight against this injustice.... The only reason that the hireling flees is because he is a hireling. A person who is in charge of the sheep, not because he loves them but because he is seeking earthly gain, cannot make a stand when the sheep are in danger. Because he esteems honor, because he enjoys his temporal advantages, he is afraid to oppose the danger for fear he should lose what he loves so much.

Augustine: Many that seek temporal advantages in the church preach Christ, and through them Christ's voice is heard. But the sheep are not following the hireling but the voice of the Shepherd speaking through the hireling.

Clement of Alexandria: You may learn, if you will, the profound wisdom of the most holy Shepherd and instructor, the Lord of the universe and the Word of the Father. He presents himself to us by way of allegory as the shepherd of the sheep, and so in this way serves also as the teacher of children. Speaking through Ezekiel to the Jewish elders, he gives them a salutary example of true care. "I will bind up the injured and will heal the sick; I will bring back the strays and pasture them on my holy mountain." These are the promises of the good Shepherd. Pasture us children like sheep, O Lord. Fill us with your own food, the food of righteousness. As our instructor, feed us on your holy mountain, the church above the clouds that touches the heavens.

Cyril of Alexandria: When Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father," it is equivalent to saying, I shall enter into a close relationship with my sheep, and my sheep shall be brought into a close relationship with me, according to the manner in which the Father is intimate with me, and again I also am intimate with the Father. For God the Father knows his own Son and the fruit of his [i.e., the Father's] substance because he is truly his parent. And again, the Son knows the Father, beholding him as God in truth, since he is begotten of him. In the same way, we also, being brought into a close relationship with God the Father, are called his family and are spoken of as children, according to what he himself said: "Behold, I and the children whom God has given me." Truly, we are called the family of the Son, and in fact we are part of his family. Through our relationship to the Son, we are related to God the Father, because the Only Begotten, who is God of God, was made man, and though separate from all sin, he assumed our human nature.

Cyril of Alexandria: Christ did not endure death against his will on our behalf and for our sakes. Rather, we see him go toward it voluntarily, although he could easily escape the suffering if he did not want to suffer. Therefore, in his willingness even to suffer for us, we shall see the excellent quality of his love toward us and the immensity of his kindness.

Augustine: So listen to this unity being even more urgently drawn to your attention: "I have other sheep," he says, "who are not of this fold." He was talking, you see, to the first sheepfold of the race of Israel according to the flesh. But there were others, of the race of the same Israel according to faith, and they were still outside, they were of the Gentiles, predestined but not yet gathered in. He knew those whom he had predestined. He knew those whom he had come to redeem by shedding his blood. He was able to see them, while they could not yet see him. He knew them, though they did not yet believe in him. "I have," he said, "other sheep that are not of this fold," because they are not of the race of Israel according to the flesh. But all the same, they will not be outside this sheepfold, because "I must bring them along too, so that there may be one flock and one shepherd."

Augustine: Let them all be in the one Shepherd and speak with the one voice of the Shepherd, which the sheep may hear and follow their shepherd, not this or that shepherd, but the one Shepherd. And in him let them all speak with one voice, not with conflicting voices.

Cyril of Alexandria: If we see ourselves in our own child, we are drawn to an intensity of love whenever we see that child. In the same way, I think God the Father is said to love his own Son, who lays down his own life for us and takes it again. For it is a work of love to have chosen to suffer—and to suffer shamefully—for the salvation of some. It is a work of love not only to die but also to take again the life that was laid down in order to destroy death and to take away sorrow from corruption. Although the Son is always beloved by reason of his nature, it is evident that Christ is also beloved by God the Father because of his love toward us. Naturally, this gladdens the heart of God the Father since he can see the image of his own nature clearly and perfectly shining forth through Christ's love for us.

John Chrysostom: What could be fuller of humanity than when our Lord says that he is loved because he is dying for us? Wasn't he loved before this? Is it only now that the Father begins to love him and are we the causes of that love? See how he condescends to our level. But what is he trying to prove here? They had said he was a stranger to the Father and a deceiver who had come only to ruin and destroy. And so he tells them: Even if there was nothing else that made me love you, the fact that you are loved by my Father in such a way that I win his love by dying for you—that alone is reason enough to love you. He also shows that he did not do this under compulsion. For if he did it under compulsion, how could love be the motive? And that willingness on his part was something especially known by his Father.

Athanasius: To be troubled was proper to the flesh, and to have power to lay down his life and take it again when he wanted was no property of people but of the Word's power. For human beings die not by their own power but by necessity of nature and against their will. But the Lord, being himself immortal but having mortal flesh, had power as God to become separate from the body and to take it again when he wanted to. Concerning this David speaks in the psalm: "You shall not leave my soul in hades, neither shall you suffer your holy One to see corruption." For it was appropriate to the flesh, corruptible as it was, that it should no longer after its own nature remain mortal, but because of the Word who had put it on, it should remain incorruptible. For since he was conformed to our condition, having come in our body, so we when we receive him partake of the immortality that is from him.

Augustine: Here he shows that his natural death was not the consequence of sin in him but of his own simple will, which was the why, the when and the how [of his death]. For because the Word of God is so commingled [with the flesh] as to be one with it, he says, "I have power to lay it down."

John Chrysostom: Because they had often plotted to kill him, he tells them their efforts will be useless unless he is willing.... I have such power over my own life that no one can take it from me against my will. This power does not belong to human beings. We do not

have the power of laying down our own lives unless we put ourselves to death.... Our Lord alone had the power to lay down his life, showing also that he was able to take it up again by that same power. Do you see how he proved from his death that his resurrection was indisputable?

Augustine: How then does our Lord lay down his own life?... Christ is the Word and man, not man as flesh alone but as soul and flesh, so that in Christ there is a complete humanity.... This refutes the Apollinarians, who say that Christ did not have a human, rational soul.... Does the Word lay down his life and take it again; or does the human soul, or does the flesh?... If it was the Word of God that laid down his soul and took it again ... that soul was at one time separated from the Word.... But, though death separated the soul and body, death could not separate the Word and the soul.... It is still more absurd to say that the soul laid down itself; if it could not be separated from the Word, how could it be separated from itself?... The flesh therefore lays down its life and takes it again, not by its own power but by the power of the Word.

John Calvin:

*Vs 11. The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.*

From the extraordinary affection which he bears towards the sheep, he shows how truly he acts towards them as a shepherd; for he is so anxious about their salvation, that he does not even spare his own life. Hence it follows, that they who reject the guardianship of so kind and amiable a shepherd are exceedingly ungrateful, and deserve a hundred deaths, and are exposed to every kind of harm. The remark of Augustine is exceedingly just, that this passage informs us what we ought to desire, what we ought to avoid, and what we ought to endure, in the government of the Church. Nothing is more desirable than that the Church should be governed by good and diligent shepherds Christ declares that he is the good shepherd, who keeps his Church safe and sound, first, by himself, and, next, by his agents. Whenever there is good order, and fit men hold the government, then Christ shows that he is actually the shepherd. But there are many wolves and thieves who, wearing the garb of shepherds, wickedly scatter the Church. Whatever name such persons may assume, Christ threatens that we must avoid them.

*Vs 12. But the hireling.*

By hirelings we are to understand those who retain the pure doctrine, and who proclaim the truth, as Paul says, to serve a purpose rather than from pure zeal. Though such persons do not serve Christ faithfully, yet we ought to hear them; for Christ wished that the Pharisees should be heard, because they sat in Moses' seat, (Matthew 23:2;) and, in like manner, we ought to give such honor to the Gospel, as not to shrink from its ministers, though they be not good men. And as even the slightest offenses render the Gospel distasteful to us, that we may not be hindered by such false delicacy, let us always remember what I have formerly suggested, that if the Spirit of Christ does not operate so powerfully in ministers, as to make it plainly evident that he is their shepherd, we suffer the punishment of our sins, and yet our obedience is proved.

*And he who is not the shepherd.*

Though Christ claims for himself alone the name of a shepherd, yet he indirectly states that, in some respects, he holds it in common with the agents by whom he acts. For we know that there have been many, since the time of Christ, who did not hesitate to shed their blood for the salvation of the Church; and even the prophets, before his coming, did not spare their own life. But in his own person he holds out a perfect example, so as to lay down a rule for his ministers. For how base and shameful is our indolence, if our life is more dear to us than the salvation of the Church, which Christ preferred to his own life!

What is here said about laying down life for the sheep, may be viewed as an undoubted and principal mark of paternal affection. Christ intended, first, to demonstrate what a remarkable proof he gave of his love toward us, and, next, to excite all his ministers to imitate his example. Yet we must attend to the difference between them and him. He laid down his life as the price of satisfaction, shed his blood to cleanse our souls, offered his body as a propitiatory sacrifice, to reconcile the Father to us. Nothing of all this can exist in the ministers of the Gospel, all of whom need to be cleansed, and receive atonement and reconciliation to God by that single sacrifice. But Christ does not argue here about the efficacy or benefit of his death, so as to compare himself to others, but to prove with what zeal and affection he is moved towards us, and, next, to invite others to follow his example. In short, as it belongs exclusively to Christ to procure life for us by his death, and to fulfill all that is contained in the Gospel, so it is the universal duty of all pastors or shepherds, to defend the doctrine which they proclaim, even at the expense of their life, and to seal the doctrine of the Gospel with their blood, and to show that it is not in vain that they teach that Christ has procured salvation for themselves and for others.

But here a question may be put. Ought we to reckon that man a hireling, who, for any reason whatever, shrinks from encountering the wolves? This was anciently debated as a practical question, when tyrants raged cruelly against the Church. Tertullian, and others of the same class, were, in my opinion, too rigid on this point. I prefer greatly the moderation of Augustine, who allows pastors to flee on the condition that, by their flight, they contribute more to the public safety than they would do by betraying the flock committed to their charge. And he shows that this is done, when the Church is not deprived of well-qualified ministers, and when the life of the pastor in particular is so eagerly sought, that his absence mitigates the rage of enemies. But if the flock – as well as the pastor – be in danger, and if there be reason to believe that the pastor flees, not so much from a desire to promote the public advantage as from a dread of dying, Augustine contends that this is not at all lawful, because the example of his flight will do more injury than his life can do good in future. The reader may consult the Epistle to Bishop Honoratus, (Ep. 108) On this ground it was lawful for Cyprian to flee, who was so far from shuddering at death, that he nobly refused to accept the offer of saving his life by a treacherous denial of his Master. Only it must be held that a pastor ought to prefer his flock, or even a single sheep, to his own life.

*Whose own the sheep are not.*

Christ appears here to make all shepherds besides himself to be, without exception, hirelings; for, since he alone is shepherd, none of us have a right to say that the sheep which he feeds are his own. But let us remember that they who are guided by the Spirit of God reckon that to be their own which belongs to their Head; and that not in order to claim power for themselves, but to keep faithfully what has been committed to their charge. For he who is truly united to Christ will never cease to take an interest in that which He valued so highly. This is what he afterwards says:

*Vs 13. The hireling fleeth.*

The reason is, because he careth not for the sheep, which means, that his heart is not moved by the scattering of the flock, because he thinks that it does not at all belong to him. For he who looks to the hire, and not to the flock, though he may deceive others, when the Church is in a state of tranquillity, yet when he comes into the contest, will give proof of his treachery.

*Vs 14. And I know my sheep, and am known by mine.*

In the former clause, he again holds out his love towards us; for knowledge proceeds from love, and is accompanied by care. But it means also that he utterly disregards all who do not obey the Gospel, as he repeats in the second clause, and confirms what he had formerly said, that – on the other hand – he is known by the sheep

*Vs 15. As the Father knoweth me.*

It is unnecessary, and is not even expedient, that we should enter into those thorny questions, How is it that the Father knows his Wisdom? For Christ simply declares that, so far as he is the bond of our union with God, he is placed between Him and us; as if he had said, that it is no more possible for him to forget us, than that he should be rejected or disregarded by the Father. At the same time, he demands the duty which we mutually owe to him, because, as he employs all the power which he has received from the Father for our protection, so he wishes that we should be obedient and devoted to him, as he is wholly devoted to his Father, and refers everything to him.

*Vs 16. And I have other sheep.*

Though some refer this indiscriminately to all, both Jews and Gentiles, who were not yet disciples of Christ, yet I have no doubt that he had in his eye the calling of the Gentiles. For he gives the appellation fold to the assemblage of the ancient people, by which they were separated from the other nations of the world, and united into one body as the heritage of God. The Jews had been adopted by God in such a manner, that he surrounded them with certain enclosures, which consisted of rites and ceremonies, that they might not be confounded with unbelievers, though the door of the fold was the gracious covenant of eternal life confirmed in Christ. For this reason he calls those sheep which had not the same mark, but belonged to a different class, other sheep. In short, the meaning is, that the pastoral office of Christ is not confined within the limits of Judea, but is far more extensive.

Augustine's observation on this passage is undoubtedly true, that, as there are many wolves within the Church, so there are many sheep without. But this is not applicable, in every respect, to the present passage, which relates to the outward aspect of the Church, because the Gentiles, who had been strangers for a time, were afterwards invited into the kingdom of God, along with the Jews. Yet I acknowledge that Augustine's statement applies in this respect, that Christ gives the name of sheep to unbelievers, who in themselves were the farthest possible from being entitled to be called sheep. And not only does he point out, by this term, what they will be, but rather refers this to the secret election of God, because we are already God's sheep, before we are aware that He is our shepherd. In like manner, it is elsewhere said that we were enemies, when he loved us, (Romans 5:10;) and for this reason Paul also says that we were known by God, before we knew him, (Galatians 4:9.)

*Them also I must bring.*

He means that the election of God will be secure, so that nothing of all that he wishes to be saved shall perish. For the secret purpose of God, by which men were ordained to life, is at length manifested in his own time by the calling, – the effectual calling, when he regenerates by his Spirit, to be his sons, those who formerly were begotten of flesh and blood.

*And they shall hear my voice.*

We must observe the way in which the flock of God is gathered. It is, when all have one shepherd, and when his voice alone is heard. These words mean that, when the Church submits to Christ alone, and obeys his commands, and hears his voice and his doctrine, then only is it in a state of good order. If Papists can show us that there is any thing of this sort among them, let them enjoy the title of The Church, of which they vaunt so much. But if Christ is silent there, if his majesty is trodden under foot, if his sacred ordinances are held up to scorn, what else is their unity but a diabolical conspiracy, which is worse and far more to be abhorred than any dispersion? Let us therefore remember that we ought always to begin with the Head. Hence also the Prophets, when they describe the restoration of the Church, always join David the king with God; as if they said, that there is no Church where Christ does not reign, and that there is no kingdom of God, but where the honor of shepherd is granted to Christ.

*Vs 17. On this account the Father loveth me.*

There is, indeed, another and a higher reason why the Father loveth the Son; for it was not in vain that a voice was heard from heaven, This is my beloved Son, in whom the good-pleasure of God dwells, (Matthew 3:17; 17:5.) But as he was made man on our account, and as the Father delighted in him, in order that he might reconcile us to himself, we need not wonder if he declares it to be the reason why the Father loveth him, that our salvation is dearer to him than his own life. This is a wonderful commendation of the goodness of God to us, and ought justly to arouse our whole souls into rapturous admiration, that not only does God extend to us the love which is due to the only-begotten Son, but he refers it to us as the final cause. And indeed there was no necessity that Christ should take upon him our flesh, in which he was beloved, but that it might be the pledge of the mercy of his Father in redeeming us.

*That I may take it again.*

As the disciples might be deeply grieved on account of what they had heard about the death of Christ, and as their faith might even be greatly shaken, he comforts them by the hope of his resurrection, which would speedily take place; as if he said, that he would not die on the condition of being swallowed up by death, but in order that he might soon rise again as a conqueror. And even at the present day, we ought to contemplate the death of Christ, so as to remember, at the same time, the glory of his resurrection. Thus, we know that he is life, because, in his contest with death, he obtained a splendid victory, and achieved a noble triumph.

*Vs 18. No man taketh it from me.*

This is another consolation, by which the disciples may take courage as to the death of Christ, that he does not die by constraint, but offers himself willingly for the salvation of his flock. Not only does he affirm that men have no power to put him to death, except so far as he permits them, but he declares that he is free from every violence of necessity. It is otherwise with us, for we are laid under a necessity of dying on account of our sins. True, Christ himself was born a mortal man; but this was a voluntary submission, and not a bondage laid upon him by another. Christ intended, therefore, to fortify his disciples, that, when they saw him shortly afterwards dragged to death, they might not be dismayed, as if he had been oppressed by enemies, but might acknowledge that it was done by the wonderful Providence of God, that he should die for the redemption of his flock. And this doctrine is of perpetual advantage, that the death of Christ is an expiation for our sins, because it was a voluntary sacrifice, according to the saying of Paul, By the obedience of one many were made righteous, (Romans 5:19.)

*But I lay it down of myself.*

These words may be explained in two ways; either that Christ divests himself of life, but still remains what he was, just as a person would lay aside a garment from his body, or, that he dies by his own choice.

*This commandment have I received from my Father.*

He recalls our attention to the eternal purpose of the Father, in order to inform us that He had such care about our salvation, that he dedicated to us his only-begotten Son great and excellent as he is; and Christ himself, who came into the world to be in all respects obedient to the Father, confirms the statement, that he has no other object in view than to promote our benefit.