



## **2015 Catechists Commissioning Mass**

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth  
Thursday, 5 November 2015

I don't know if any of you have ever heard of Evelyn Underhill. She was an English woman, a member of the Church of England, married though without any children, who was a spiritual director, retreat leader and spiritual writer. She died in 1941.

I mention her tonight because she once gave a talk to a group of Sunday school teachers in which, in a very simple way, she developed a spirituality for her listeners which I would like to offer to all of you this evening. We don't normally use the phrase "Sunday School teacher" in our Catholic tradition. We are much more inclined to speak of "catechists". The spirituality which Evelyn Underhill offered the catechists of her time and place is one that makes a great deal of sense to me and I hope it will be the same for you.

Evelyn Underhill based her talk on an experience she had had while visiting a country sheep dog trial in rural England. She noticed that, even though the sheep could be very unpredictable, they were kept in order very successfully by the sheep dogs which never seemed to tire of running around and around, making sure that none of the sheep escaped from the fold and went off on their own. They were very active dogs with seemingly boundless energy. But one thing struck Evelyn Underhill more than anything else. While the sheep dogs were ready to run as much as they had to, they actually spent most of their time sitting down with their eyes very firmly fixed on the shepherd, waiting for a sign from him before they moved an inch. The sheep dogs were, it seemed to her, an extension of the shepherd, only interested in obeying him and quite ready to wait patiently until he gave the signal.

The point, of course, is that what made those sheep dogs so effective and so successful was the fact that they had their eyes firmly fixed on the shepherd and had no desire to do anything other than what he wanted.

As Christians, we are very familiar with the idea that we have our own shepherd, the Good Shepherd, and that we are, together, the members of His flock. As you all know, I am asking all of us as members of the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Perth to begin to reflect deeply on our identity as a people who, together, are walking in the



footsteps of the Good Shepherd. This is why, for example, I have adopted the image of the Good Shepherd which you find on the cover of your booklet tonight as the visual expression of who we are and who we are striving to be. I am convinced that the only way forward for us as a community is to keep our eyes fixed on Him, to listen carefully for His word, to wait patiently for the guidance He will give us, and keep on following in His footsteps.

If this is true for all of us who together make up the Catholic community here in our Archdiocese, it is especially true for all those who have heard, and responded to, a special call to ministry within the community. Catechists are just such people. You have responded generously to the Spirit of God who has been at work in your lives leading you to the realisation that this is what God is asking of you at this time. And, like the sheep dogs in Evelyn Underhill's story, you too must keep your eyes fixed on the master, on the shepherd, and have as your desire nothing other than to respond in the ways that Jesus asks of you.

To listen to His word; to follow in His footsteps: what might this mean for you as catechists in the context of tonight's Gospel?

As He so often does, Jesus, in tonight's reading, makes use of the image of the shepherd. In fact, the image on your Mass booklet is a reference to this parable of the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep and who, when he finds it, lifts it on to his shoulders and carries it back to safety. As we listen to Jesus in tonight's Gospel, we gain a rich insight into His mind and heart. He wants us to understand that, in the image of this shepherd, we find a reflection of the mystery of God. Just like the shepherd, God Himself goes in search of the strays and the lost ones and carries them back to the safety of the flock. In itself, it is already a beautiful image but, when we consider it more carefully, we realise that it is also a rather remarkable and even shocking one. Jesus begins by saying to His listeners, *"who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go in search of the lost one?"* Jesus' listeners would have been, by and large, rural people. They would have understood the realities of the life of the shepherd and how much his livelihood depended on keeping the sheep safe. For that reason, as they listened to Jesus, they must have thought how foolish the shepherd was to go off in search of the lost sheep and leave the ninety-nine unattended. What if they had all wandered off while he was away searching for the stray? It could have been a disaster!

What Jesus is trying to say is that the compassion of God for the lost goes beyond all the bounds of human calculation. There is no weighing up of the risks, or of the advantages or otherwise, of the decision to go in search of the one who is lost. In God's mind, if we can put it that way, there is no cost too great, and no risk not worth taking, to bring someone home. The question for us, in the light of this parable, is this: do I really believe that this is how God thinks of me when I fail, or when I sin, or when I get hopelessly lost? Do I really believe that God loves me this much?



It is the same with the story of the widow who lights all the lamps in the house in search of the lost coin and who then calls all her neighbours together to celebrate with her when she finds the coin. In the logic of the story, the cost of the oil for the lamps and the celebrations with her neighbours afterwards would probably have been greater than the value of the coin she had lost in the first place. It makes no sense for her to do what she did, or at least no economic sense. But Jesus is inviting us to understand that God's love for His people, God's love for each of us, goes far beyond anything our human reason can make sense of.

The actions of the shepherd and the widow might seem foolish or even reckless to us. Humanly speaking, they were. For Jesus, however, they are windows into the mystery of God's love for us. As St Paul reminds us, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

As catechists, you are being called to keep your eyes very firmly fixed on the man who told these stories out of the depths of His own intimate relationship with God, His Father. It is His work you are doing, His message you are communicating, His love you are sharing. Tonight, let us all commit ourselves once again to doing all we can to ensure that it really is the God of Jesus, the God who is imaged in the shepherd and the widow, whom we are bringing to those we teach.