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General audience: no distance can keep the shepherd from his lost sheep

Vatican City, 4 May 2016 – The image of the Good Shepherd carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders has always represented Jesus' care for sinners and the mercy of God Who is never resigned to losing anyone. The Pope dedicated the catechesis of this Wednesday's general audience in St. Peter's Square, attended by more than 20,000 people, to this parable and its deeper meaning.

Francis explained that Jesus narrates the parable to illustrate that his closeness to sinners should not scandalise us but rather, on the contrary, should provoke us all to reflect seriously on how we live our faith. The parable has three key subjects – the shepherd, the lost sheep and the rest of the flock – but the only one who acts is the shepherd, the sole protagonist on whom the others depend. The question Jesus asks sounds paradoxical: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

According to biblical tradition, the desert is the place of death, where it is difficult to find food and water, there is no shelter and one is at the mercy of wild animals and thieves. It would not seem sensible but nonetheless the Good Shepherd goes there. "Jesus wants to teach us that no sheep can be lost … and that the Lord cannot be resigned to the fact that a single person can be lost", said the Pope. "God's act is that of those who go in search of their lost children, and who then feast and rejoice with everyone when they are found. It is an unstoppable desire: not even the ninety-nine sheep are able to stop the pastor and keep him inside the pen. He could have said, 'On balance I have ninety-nine, I have lost one, but it is not a great loss.' Instead He goes in search of that one, because each one is very important to Him, and that is the one most in need, the most abandoned, the most discarded, and so He goes in search of it. … We are all shown that mercy towards sinners is the style with which God acts, and He is totally faithful to this mercy. Nothing and no-one may distract Him from His desire to save. … God discards no-one; God loves everyone, He seeks everyone; one by one."

"The Lord's flock is always journeying: it does not possess the Lord, and we cannot hope to imprison Him in our plans and our strategies. The shepherd will always be found where there is the lost sheep. The Lord must therefore be sought where He wants to encounter us, not where we demand to find Him. There is no way to reunite the flock other than by following the way shown to us by the shepherd's mercy."

"We should reflect on this parable often, because in the Christian community there is always someone who is

missing and who has left an empty space. At times this is discouraging and leads us to belief that there is an inevitable loss, an incurable illness. It is then that we run the risk of closing ourselves up in the fold, where there is not the odour of the sheep but rather the smell of closed space. ... And Christians? We must not be closed, because we will have a musty odour. Never! We must go out, not close ourselves up in small communities, in the parish, considering ourselves righteous. This happens when there is a lack of the missionary zeal that leads us to encounter others. In Jesus' vision there are no definitively lost sheep, only sheep who need to be found. We must understand this clearly: for God, no-one is definitively lost. Never! Right up to the last moment, God looks for us. Think of the good thief. … The perspective is therefore entirely dynamic, open, stimulating and creative. It drives us to go out to look for a path of fraternity. No distance can keep the pastor away, and no flock can give up one of its brothers. Finding those who are lost is the joy of the shepherd and of God, but it is also the joy of all the flock". Francis concluded, "We are all lost sheep who have been found again and restored to the fold."