

## Chapter 10: SHEEP

*“For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, the sheep under His care.” (Psalm 95:7)  
“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought all His own outside, He goes ahead of them. The sheep follow Him because they recognize His voice. ...I am the good shepherd. I know My own sheep, and they know Me, as the Father knows Me and I know the Father. I lay down My life for the sheep.” (John 10:3-5,14-15)*



Carol visiting at lambing season



Mother Pilar and her flock at cookie time

From 1986 until the Mothers moved into Shepherd's House in 2006, they were involved with sheep. Sheep care was originally as a source of income, but the sheep flock quickly began to be a visual reminder of what the Scriptures have to say about Christ as the Good Shepherd and His flock. This animal husbandry never turned out to be profitable financially, but the sheep stayed anyway.

At the 2000 Board Meeting the Mothers were asked to explain why they wanted to continue with the sheep operation after 13 years of little to no profit. Their response reflected their experiences:

“The flock teaches us about ourselves.

The sheep and lambs are a blessing to retreatants and visitors.

The work is appropriate manual labor.

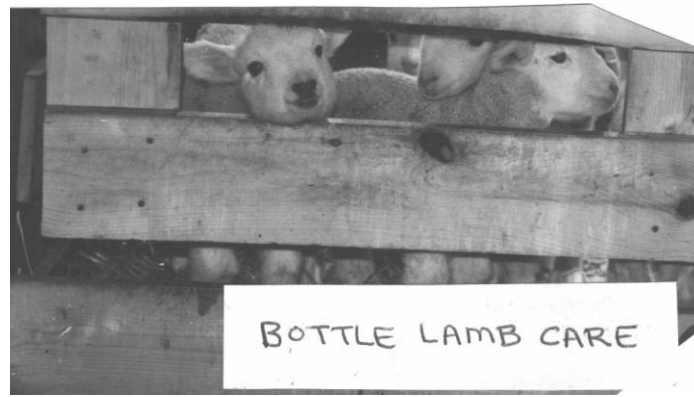
Sheep are social creatures, a reminder of the importance of communal living.

The neediness of the sheep challenges our selfishness.

The sheep provide an outlet for physical affection.

Sheep production gives us good contacts with the local farming community.”

## In the Beginning



The local EOC priest in Ladoga lived across the road from the monastery, and he and his family were in the sheep business as well as being grain farmers. He knew the Mothers were in need of income, so he asked if they would be willing to raise his lambs that were orphaned or needed special attention. The Ladoga house had a small enclosed back porch, so a pen was made there and the lambs started coming. Each needing bottle feeding several times a day. Some of the lambs needing medical attention.

From Holy Redeemer's May 1987 newsletter: "We couldn't update you on our happenings without mentioning our dear sheep. The small project of caring for bottle-fed lambs has turned into a significant part of our life. We ended up with 16 lambs over the winter, experiencing life and death, sickness and recovery. Each lamb got named for the saint whose feast day we were celebrating when it came. The owner of the sheep decided to put them in the pasture surrounding our property for the summer, so we continue to see them grow. An attack on them by predators was a shock, but a nearby shed has now been fortified to protect them at night. We have found so much joy and reward in caring for them that we are hoping to take on this small flock for breeding, meat, and wool this Fall and become permanent shepherdesses."

By the end of that year this was in the December newsletter: "Speaking of sheep – have we got sheep! Last year our first bottle lambs from our neighbor came the week before Christmas. Already this year we have a dozen little crying babies on our back porch. We feel better prepared and a bit more experienced, but it continues daily to be a challenge. Some monk friends in New York who breed dogs tell us that animal care keeps you humble! We've been too busy to tell yet – hot baths and drying with a hair dryer to get their temperature up, force feeding until they learn how to suck, shots against pneumonia and lamb diseases and, of course, lots of affection."

## The Holy Redeemer Flock

After the first year of lamb care and watching those first lambs grow, the Mothers asked if they could keep the sheep to begin their own flock and give replacements to the neighbor when their own lambs were born. He agreed, and Holy Redeemer was in the sheep business.

The December, 1987 newsletter included: "Our own ewes are doing well, moving rapidly toward motherhood. Our little barn has been winterized thanks to many long and creative hours spent by Sr. Pilar's making lambing pens (jugs), a manger, a fenced hay enclosure, and a storage room. We are

particularly grateful for the gift of water and electricity run to the barn and a 1-day seminar at Purdue University on sheep obstetrics.”

Mid-winter 1988 was the occasion for the first Holy Redeemer lamb. Little Stephen came on Feb 13<sup>th</sup> on a +2 degree morning, with some midwifery help from Mother Pilar. The 1-year old ewe Themia was the first of their own sheep to become a mother – to Themia’s surprise and the Mothers' delight. The lambing season eventually produced four single lambs and two sets of twins.

After the initial flock of 6 ewes, 64 more ewes and rams were added to the monastery flock over the years. The busiest year for lambing was 2000 when there were 20 mothers with 34 lambs. One year there was a set of quadruplets. The total Holy Redeemer lambs born was 354, so you can see there was enough opportunity for manual labor.



What kind of manual labor? During lambing season, Carol would come from Indianapolis and use part of her vacation to assist with the sheep work. Delivery of the lambs needed oversight and sometimes assistance by Mother Pilar or Carol. Birthing generated a lot of laundry (Mother Paula's responsibility). Regular care of all the sheep required feeding and watering, freeing from the barn and gathering in, barn housekeeping (including removal of rats, wasps, and snakes), fence construction and repair, hoof repair, pasture seeding and maintenance, and medical necessities. Some situations also required bottle-feeding, grafting lambs onto other mothers, whole-flock treatment to prevent spread of disease, catching runaway sheep, and occasionally burying.

Care of livestock is not convenient, or neat, or easy, or without stress. Animals are unpredictable and sometimes stubborn, they are demanding, they get sick, they sometimes die, they don't often appreciate what is done for them. Caring for them takes money, time, skill, and strength. Manual labor with the sheep was a great teacher of patience, humility, and faith.

## Those Funny Names

The Mothers have always named their animals after saints, and they got lots of practice at naming when the lambs started coming. Many visitors would stop by to see the lambs while they were small and delightful. A frequently asked question was, "Where do you get all those funny names?"

Each day of the year the Church gives an opportunity to honor those who have gone before in the Faith: prophets who have spoken God's truth in difficult times, martyrs who have given their lives for the sake of the Gospel, confessors who have suffered for the Lord, and other holy men and women whose godly lives are an inspiration. Their feast day is often the day they died, sometimes the day their bones were interred in a special location, or a day in the Church's calendar year that has special significance for the saint. These saints are not worshipped. Only the Holy Trinity deserves worship. But the saints are revered because they exhibit the result of Christ's impact on a life.

Various rams made visits to the monastery. Some of them were named for obvious reasons: Israel in the hope he would be the father of many and Solomon in the hope he would have many wives. As each lamb came it was given the name of a renowned Christian saint. Naming them like this caused those who saw the sheep to think of these holy saints and their stories. The first flock was: Themia (for 4<sup>th</sup> Century St. Euthymius the Great), Olga (for 10<sup>th</sup> Century St. Olga), Elaine (that takes some explaining), Lady (she wasn't born at the monastery and her story comes later, but the Mothers thought she was pretty), Bonnie (for 8<sup>th</sup> Century St. Boniface), and Syndi (for 4<sup>th</sup> Century St. Syncletica). The lamb Stephen, because he was first, was named for the first deacon of the Church, St. Stephen.



Elaine, out of all the lambs born at Holy Redeemer, was the first named for a woman the Mothers knew. This friend stopped at the monastery for a visit on her way to California to enter a monastery for women. Elaine and another lamb, Polycarp, came from a neighbor on the day of this friend's visit, so Elaine was given her name in honor of the life-journey the friend was about to undertake. The sheep Elaine lived for 17 years, the longest living of the flock. Polycarp was killed by coyotes before the barn was renovated to keep the sheep enclosed at night. Elaine seemed to lose her group instinct after that and spent much of her field time apart from the others. She became Mother Pilar's favorite and would come when her name was called. This proved extremely helpful over the years when the sheep were at the far end of a pasture when it was time to gather them in. Just call "Elaine!", she would run in, and all the others would follow.

## Carol and the Flock

Starting in 1999, Carol spent one week of her vacation each year in Bloomfield assisting with lambing season. She was a nurse, and her willingness to help with the lamb deliveries as well as the multitude

of chores connected with the season was an immense blessing. Unknown to her and the Mothers, this began a deepening bond between them that eventually led to their living together in Agape House many years later.

When lambs were due, Mother Pilar would pitch a tent in the barn to keep watch if any of the ewes or lambs needed help. Mother Paula would take shifts watching during the day. In the busiest time of the lambing, Carol would relieve Mother Pilar so that she could get some much needed sound sleep in the house. Carol's parents even came from Texas one summer to stay in Shepherd's House for the week that Carol was on the farm.

## Of Wool and Meat and Dogs

The Mothers were often asked if they sheared their own sheep. They had enough manual labor without taking on that back-breaking work. In the early years at Ladoga, wool was a small cash crop for them. The first shearing produced 70 pounds of wool from 8 sheep. Bonnie was particularly helpful with 14 pounds all by herself. However, in later years the import of cheap New Zealand wool destroyed the local market for wool, and by the time the flock was sold in 2006 it was unprofitable to have the shearers come. For a couple of years the Mothers were able to sell a few whole fleeces to a yarn shop for customers who wanted to do their own carding, spinning, and yarn-making.

There were a few frozen lamb customers, and for a couple of years there was a Muslim customer who, because of his own tradition, came to the farm to do his own butchering. The Mothers themselves are not particularly fond of lamb, and lamb was not on the menu for monastery guests. It was always a blessing when any of the sheep moved on to other farms as breeding stock rather than end up on someone's table. Once one was even purchased for a pet! Most of the sheep not added to the monastery flock were sold at sale barn auctions.

An unexpected outcome of entering the world of sheep was the experience of having working dogs. On the left is Shim (Heman Shimron, which in Hebrew means *faithful guard*), the first of two Great Pyrenees we had. On the right is Sophia, the last of the guard dogs, an Anatolian Shepherd. What



amazing creatures these were. Their instincts were to watch over and protect wherever they were assigned, to the death if necessary. The Mothers were warned to not make pets of them so that the

dogs' decision-making regarding the flock was never compromised. So the dogs spent their lives with the flock. Eventually Sophia went to a larger farm when it was found that Holy Redeemer's 68 acres weren't a big enough territory for her to guard. They were a wonder to the Mothers and all who visited.

In the next chapter are stories about some of our other memorable animals, but in honor of our ewe "Lady", it is appropriate to include her story here.

## Lady

During the first summer at the Ladoga monastery, we determined to have a week-long silent retreat, in which we would take the opportunity for hours of uninterrupted reflection on some Scriptures and topics we had chosen. When we made our plans, we did not know that our neighbors, who also raised sheep, were going to be away on vacation. We were pleased, however, to be able to do what we could to watch over things for them while they were gone.

Right away Mother Pilar discovered that one of their young ewes was down on the ground, unable to stand. Ever the shepherdess at heart, she at first erected a tarp over the sheep to give it shade, and then placed water where the ewe could reach it. She would go several times a day to turn the ewe to a new spot where it could reach grass for grazing.

We really wanted to make our retreat work for us, so we decided to bring the ewe over to the monastery to save time in caring for her. At that time we had a small Toyota sedan that had to serve all our hauling as well as driving needs, so we fetched the ewe (which we had started calling "Lady" because of her pretty face) across the road in the backseat of the car. Please remember that this sheep had not been standing or moving about for some time, with the result that she didn't smell as nice as her name.

Mother Pilar thought that perhaps creating a sling and hoisting Lady over her feet would strengthen her legs. For days she had already been giving Lady medication for the symptoms we were seeing of white muscle disease (similar to human muscular dystrophy). Did you ever try to put a 100+ dead weight in a swinging sling? By the time we got her front end in, the back end had fallen out! By the grace of God we finally got her settled, hanging from the rafters in the barn.

The following day, when we gathered for noon prayers, Mother Pilar announced that in the afternoon she was going to cut Lady down from the sling and let her die. The time for expecting improvement from the medicine had passed, and being suspended was exhausting the sheep and causing suffering.

One of the Scripture readings on this particular day was from Acts 3: *"Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. A certain man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms. Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze upon him and said, 'Look at us!' And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!' And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened, and with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God."*

Just as Mother Paula finished the reading, Mother Pilar looked up and said, "I wish God would heal Lady like that, but I know it's silly to ask that for a sheep."

As soon as prayers were over, Mother Pilar went out to check on Lady. She immediately came running back in yelling, "Hurry, come out to the barn!" And there was Lady, standing on four strong legs, with a look on her face that could only be described as rapturous amazement. We believe her Creator had been with her in the barn and touched her. We released her from the sling, and she walked out into the pasture. The only consequence she ever had after that from her sickness was that her wool came loose and fell off.

When the neighbor returned home and heard the story of Lady, he said it seemed she belonged to the monastery, and he gave her to us. Lady lived out her days at the monastery and produced lambs for us for ten years, giving us more lambs than any other sheep we ever had.

What do we learn about God from Lady? We definitely underestimate Him, both His power and His great compassion for all He has made. It is not that we think He cannot perform miracles. Somehow we mistakenly think our worthiness or some special work on our part is required for Him to act. In all our Holy Redeemer years, we have told about Lady over and over, and the telling of it never ceases to overwhelm us every time with how much He desires to give us good things, and how much He wants us to have faith in Him.