Among the most surprising texts of ancient Christianity, there exists a work that many Catholics today scarcely know, yet for centuries it was read in churches alongside the Scriptures. A book that some Church Fathers considered inspired, that appeared copied inside ancient biblical codices, and that was deeply loved by Christians of the first centuries.

That book is *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

Its author, Hermas, probably a former Christian slave of the second century, left us a strange, symbolic, profoundly moral, and spiritually intense work. In its pages we find heavenly visions, angels appearing as shepherds, mysterious parables, warnings against spiritual lukewarmness, calls to repentance, and a constant insistence on purity of heart.

Although it ultimately did not enter the canon of the New Testament, *The Shepherd of Hermas* occupies a privileged place in the history of the Church. It is one of those texts that allows us to glimpse the soul of early Christianity: a Church still under persecution, austere, penitential, and deeply concerned with holiness.

Today, in an age marked by spiritual superficiality and moral relativism, this ancient writing feels strikingly relevant once again.

A Book Born in the Church of the Martyrs

To understand *The Shepherd of Hermas*, we must travel back to the second century, a decisive era for Christianity.

The Church was still small. Christians were periodically persecuted by the Roman Empire. Communities lived with an intense expectation of Christ's return and maintained a very demanding moral discipline. Becoming a Christian was not a cultural or social decision: it could cost one's job, family, or even life.

It is within that context that Hermas appears.

The most widespread tradition places him in Rome. The so-called *Muratorian Fragment* — one of the earliest lists of Christian books — states that Hermas was the brother of Pope Pius I, who governed the Church of Rome approximately between 140 and 155 A.D.

We do not know how much of that claim is historically accurate, but we do know that the work was probably written in Rome during the first half of the second century.

Hermas appears to have been a former slave who achieved a certain level of economic prosperity. However, as he himself recounts, he later endured family and spiritual difficulties. His work is born precisely from that experience of crisis, repentance, and conversion.

And that already tells us something important: *The Shepherd of Hermas* is not an abstract theological treatise. It is the spiritual testimony of a wounded man who discovers the mercy of God.

What Kind of Book Is *The Shepherd of Hermas*?

The work is divided into three major sections:

1. **The Visions**
2. **The Commandments**
3. **The Parables or Similitudes**

The entire book is permeated with apocalyptic and symbolic language, very similar to what we find in parts of the Book of Daniel or the Book of Revelation.

Hermas recounts encounters with heavenly figures, mysterious elderly women representing the Church, angels, towers built from living stones, and a shepherd who communicates spiritual teachings to him.

The tone may seem strange to the modern reader, but for second-century Christians this language felt familiar. Symbolism was a common way of expressing profound spiritual truths.

The Church as a Holy Elderly Woman

One of the most beautiful symbols in the book is the figure of an elderly woman who represents the Church.

At first she appears aged and weak, reflecting the sins and divisions of Christians. But little by little she becomes younger and more beautiful as the faithful repent and return to God.

The image is profoundly theological.

The Church is presented not merely as a human institution, but as a living spiritual reality. The holiness or sinfulness of Christians visibly affects the entire Body.

In an age like ours, where many reduce the Church to politics, structures, or human scandals, *The Shepherd of Hermas* reminds us of a forgotten truth: the Church is also a supernatural mystery.

The sins of the faithful wound her.

The holiness of the faithful beautifies her.

The Great Obsession of the Book: Repentance

If there is one central theme in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, it is conversion.

Hermas constantly insists on the necessity of sincere repentance. The book reflects one of the great concerns of the early Church: what happens to Christians who commit grave sins after baptism?

We must remember that in the first centuries baptism was considered a radical transformation of life. Many Christians even delayed baptism until adulthood out of fear of sinning afterward.

That is why the question was so dramatic.

The Shepherd of Hermas proclaims something extraordinarily hopeful: God still grants an

opportunity for repentance.

Not a cheap or automatic grace, but a true conversion of heart.

The book insists on:

- abandoning duplicity,
- living in purity,
- practicing truthfulness,
- rejecting greed,
- controlling anger,
- caring for the poor,
- avoiding hypocrisy.

It is an exacting, austere, and deeply concrete Christianity.

It is not enough merely to “feel like a believer.” One must live as a disciple.

The Angel Shepherd: Guide of the Soul

The central figure of the work is the “Shepherd,” an angel sent by God to instruct Hermas.

The figure immediately recalls Christ as the Good Shepherd, although in the book he functions more as a heavenly messenger and spiritual teacher.

This shepherd teaches through commandments and parables. He speaks simply, yet with enormous moral firmness.

His teachings reveal a profoundly practical spirituality:

- patience in suffering,
- control of the tongue,
- humility,
- chastity,
- sincerity,
- trust in God,

- rejection of disordered attachment to wealth.

It is striking how much this spirituality resembles that of many later saints.

Reading *The Shepherd of Hermas*, one can perceive echoes that would later appear in:

- monastic literature,
- the Desert Fathers,
- Saint Benedict,
- medieval penitential spirituality,
- and even certain aspects of Christian mysticism.

The Famous Tower Built with Living Stones

One of the best-known parables in the book describes a great tower under construction.

The tower represents the Church.

The stones are the faithful.

Some stones fit perfectly and are placed into the structure. Others must be polished. Some are damaged. Others are rejected because they are cracked or corrupted.

The image directly connects with the theology of the Church as a spiritual building found also in the New Testament.

But here it takes on a deeply personal tone.

Each Christian decides through his life whether or not to cooperate with the work of God.

It is not merely a matter of externally “belonging” to the Church, but of allowing oneself to be transformed inwardly.

At its heart, the parable speaks about holiness.

God desires to build us into living stones of His Kingdom.

Why Did Some Christians Consider It Scripture?

Here we arrive at one of the most fascinating questions.

During the second and third centuries, many Christians considered *The Shepherd of Hermas* an inspired text.

For example:

- Saint Irenaeus of Lyons cites it almost as Scripture.
- Clement of Alexandria treated it with enormous respect.
- Origen believed it was inspired.
- The famous *Codex Sinaiticus* of the fourth century includes it alongside the New Testament.

This demonstrates something important: the biblical canon did not simply fall from heaven already closed from the very beginning.

The Church gradually discerned which books had truly been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

During that process, *The Shepherd of Hermas* came remarkably close to entering the canon.

Then Why Did It Not End Up in the Bible?

The main reason was apostolicity.

Over time, the Church established more precise criteria for recognizing inspired books:

- connection to the Apostles,
- universal use in liturgy,
- doctrinal conformity,

- apostolic antiquity.

Although *The Shepherd of Hermas* was orthodox and highly esteemed, it appeared to have been written too late to come directly from the apostolic generation.

For that reason, it was ultimately excluded from the definitive canon.

Nevertheless, the Church never regarded it as a heretical work. On the contrary, it continued to be viewed as spiritually valuable and edifying reading.

In fact, many Fathers recommended reading it in order to strengthen moral life and repentance.

A Radically Serious Christianity

One thing that strikes the reader of *The Shepherd of Hermas* is the seriousness with which early Christians understood the spiritual life.

What we find is not a superficial or comfortable Christianity.

There is awareness of sin.

There is fear of God.

There is spiritual struggle.

There is moral discipline.

There is an absolute conviction that human decisions carry eternal consequences.

For modern man, accustomed to a culture in which everything seems negotiable, this can feel uncomfortable.

But also profoundly refreshing.

Hermas speaks of a faith that completely transforms existence.

Not a religion reduced to passing emotions or cultural identity.

But a new life.

The Striking Relevance of *The Shepherd of Hermas*

Although it was written nearly two thousand years ago, the book seems to describe many contemporary spiritual illnesses.

1. Double Lives

Hermas constantly denounces religious hypocrisy.

Christians who outwardly appear holy while inwardly enslaved to pride, greed, or falsehood.

It is impossible not to think of the crisis of credibility facing the Church today whenever scandals destroy the trust of the faithful.

The book reminds us that witness matters.

Deeply.

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2. Attachment to Wealth

The work sharply criticizes those who place their security in riches.

It does not simply condemn possessing material goods, but rather being dominated by them.

In a consumerist society where even Christians often measure success by purely material standards, the message feels uncomfortably relevant.

3. The Loss of the Sense of Repentance

One of the great modern tragedies is the disappearance of the language of conversion.

Many speak about self-esteem, well-being, or personal development, but almost nobody speaks about sin, repentance, or spiritual struggle.

Hermas does.

And he does so without despair.

Because for him repentance is not empty humiliation: it is the path to healing.

4. The Need to Persevere

The book constantly insists on remaining faithful amid trials and temptations.

Second-century Christians could lose their lives because of their faith.

Today, although many places no longer experience bloody persecution, there still exists cultural pressure, ridicule, and spiritual exhaustion.

The Shepherd of Hermas reminds us that daily fidelity is also a form of silent martyrdom.

Should a Catholic Read It Today?

Yes, with some important clarifications.

It is not inspired Scripture.

It is not part of the Bible.

And some of its expressions reflect disciplinary debates specific to the ancient Church.

But it remains an extraordinary testimony to early Christian spirituality.

Reading it helps one:

- better understand the first Christians,
- discover how they lived repentance,
- understand the process by which the biblical canon was formed,
- deepen one's understanding of the universal call to holiness.

Moreover, it possesses a spiritual force that is difficult to ignore.

There are entire passages that seem written for our own age.

An Echo of the Ancient Church That Still Speaks

Perhaps that is what is most fascinating about *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

It is a book situated on the very edge of the New Testament.

A text born while the direct echo of the Apostles could still be heard.

A writing that allows us to hear the concerns, struggles, and hopes of the first Christians.

And what we hear sounds astonishingly familiar.

Because the human heart still needs the same things:

- conversion,
- truth,
- mercy,
- fidelity,
- hope.

Hermas, that former slave of the second century, continues to remind us of something essential: holiness does not consist in being perfect from the beginning, but in allowing ourselves to be patiently rebuilt by God.

Like living stones of an eternal tower that is still being raised today.