



A STUDY GUIDE TO

# THE SHEPHERDS' PRAYER

*A Christmas Novel*

## STUDY GROUPS

### *Preparation*

Prior to the study group's first meeting, all participants should read the following portions of *The Shepherds' Prayer*: the author's introduction (called "The Story Behind the Shepherds' Prayer" and found inside the front of the dust jacket), the prologue and chapters 1-2. They will also need the following materials:

- 1) A copy of *The Shepherds' Prayer*
- 2) A Bible (We recommend using the Revised Standard Version—Catholic Edition or the New American Bible)
- 3) The introduction to the study (see p. 3 below).

At least one copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (second edition) will be helpful to have on hand during your group study to answer any questions that might arise.

### *Length of study group program*

We recommend that your study group program last 4 weeks. Since the study program is designed to complement the season of Advent, we recommend the four weeks of Advent (the weeks in December leading up to Christmas) as the best time for the study, although beginning in the last week of November before Advent may be a good choice where there is concern about conflict with other events and commitments in late December. The length of each study can be varied based on the number of questions you choose to discuss each week and the time constraints of your group or church.

### *Choosing the questions for discussion*

This guide is arranged around several themes that occur in the story, *The Shepherds' Prayer*. The group leader may wish to select among the themes and questions in the interest of time.

### *How to conduct a study session*

It is recommended that each member of the study group read in advance the selection from *The Shepherds' Prayer* to be discussed at a particular session. You should print or photocopy as many copies of this study guide as needed so your group conversations are more fruitful.

1. Discussion sessions should typically last about 30 to 60 minutes. Your time could be allocated in the following way:

#### *30-Minute Session*

- |                                    |            |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| • Greetings and Opening Prayer     | 5 minutes  |
| • Discussion of Questions          | 20 minutes |
| • Closing Meditation and Petitions | 5 minutes  |

(See recommended meditations at the end of each section of Questions)

*45-Minute Session*

- Greetings and Opening Prayer 5 minutes
- Discussion of Questions 35 minutes
- Closing Meditation and Petitions 5 minutes

(See recommended meditations at the end of each section of Questions)

*60-Minute Session*

- Greetings and Opening Prayer 10 minutes
- Discussion of Questions 40 minutes
- Closing Meditation and Petitions 10 minutes

(See recommended meditations at the end of each section of Questions)

2. It is important for each session to start and end on time so people can rely on this consistency. In particular, it often hurts attendance if the ending time changes from week to week.
3. The group leader should be familiar with both the *The Shepherds' Prayer* and this study guide. While formal theological training is not necessary, the group study will be more fruitful if the leader is well-versed in the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church. This will help your discussions bear more fruit and remain faithful to Church teaching.
4. Individual group members should read selected portions of *The Shepherds' Prayer* in advance of each week's study. Scripture readings for the study can be distributed among participants for reading at the study or in advance, at the facilitator's discretion.

## INTRODUCTION TO FIRST LESSON

(Study leader should make enough copies of this for each participant and distribute them before the study.)

Welcome to this study of:

# THE SHEPHERDS' PRAYER

*A Christmas Novel*

This compelling story follows a thoughtful, questioning protagonist into the very heart of the Christmas story—and to an encounter with the Incarnate Christ.

There are several themes woven within this story and each theme will be highlighted to a greater or lesser extent each week. Here is a capsule overview of each theme. You may wish to look for these themes while you read each week's suggested passages as they will form the basis of the discussion questions.

1. The Advent Journey: The protagonist (hero) of our story spends a good portion of the narrative on a journey. As he proceeds on his way, unbeknownst to him, Christ is coming toward him. *The Advent journey then is one of moving toward the Lord who is Himself coming to us.*
2. The Existential Questions: The protagonist of the story is journeying in search of answers to deep and fundamental human questions of identity and meaning. You may find echoes of your own deepest questions in his.
3. The story is a historical fiction—that is to say that it is set within real events that are part of both biblical, sacred history and part of secular history, just as our own lives and personal stories are. The fulfillment of prophecy—in essence history written in advance—calls attention to the Sovereignty of God and the inexorable working out of His purposes in time and in our own lives.

The reading for our first week's study is *The Shepherds' Prayer*: the author's introduction (called "The Story Behind the Shepherds' Prayer" and found inside the front of the dust jacket), the prologue (pp. 9-11), and chapters 1-2 (pp.13-29)

Our first weekly study will meet at \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_,  
location day of the week

\_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_. For info call \_\_\_\_\_.  
date time time phone #

### *Suggested list of questions for study*

NOTE: The following numbered questions refer to material in *The Shepherds' Prayer* along with supplemental sources, either cited Scriptures which can be read as time permits or quotations from other works included within this study guide. Page numbers for the section of the book referenced in the question appear in parentheses. Some questions will simply be marked "discussion," because they are asking participants to answer from their own experience. These questions are prepared for use of the study facilitator who may distribute them in advance to participants if he or she so desires.

## WEEK 1

### *The Story Behind*

1. Barry calls the story of the people of Bethlehem and the shepherds an "untold" story. Although the shepherds always make an appearance in Christmas pageants and manger scenes, would you agree that most of us have given very little thought to them as living persons and the impact of the events of Christmas night on their lives? How do you think that focusing on these characters might make the very familiar story of Christmas seem fresh and new? (Discussion)

### *Prologue*

2. Read Matthew 2:16-18 and Jeremiah 31:15 and the excerpt from Catholic Encyclopedia Online (below). When we enter in our imagination into the thoughts and feelings of the young mother tragically portrayed here, do we imagine that she knew what was happening to her was a fulfillment of some ancient prophecy? Might we often be similarly blind as to how tragic events on our own lives are part of God's plan? (Prologue)

The Church venerates these children as martyrs; they are the first buds of the Church killed by the frost of persecution; St. Augustine explains that they died not only for Christ, but in his stead. In connection with them the Apostle recalls the words of the Prophet Jeremiah 31:15) speaking of the lamentation of Rachel. At Rama (a small village close to Bethlehem) is the tomb of Rachel, representative of the ancestresses of Israel. There the remnants of the nation were gathered to be led into captivity. As for Rachel, after the fall of Jerusalem, from her tomb wept for the sons of Ephraim, so she now weeps again for the male children of Bethlehem. The ruin of her people, led away to Babylon, is only a type of the ruin which menaces her children now, when the Messiah is to be murdered and is compelled to flee from the midst of His own nation to escape from the sword. (Adapted from the Catholic Encyclopedia Online.)

3. The Church celebrates the untimely deaths of the little children of Bethlehem in the feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28. This is also called "Childermas Day" and traditionally has been a day for parents to bless their children. What traditions do our parish/es or families have for the celebration of this feast? (Discussion)

## Chapter 1

4. How is Anam established within the first few paragraphs as a man who is suffering from profound isolation even within the midst of a loving family celebration? (pp 13, 14 )
5. How does his isolation at the family gathering imply a larger sense of isolation within his society? (pp 14-16)
6. Anam begins his journey with a movement toward his own foster-father. What is it about his father that encourages him to take this step? (pp 16-17)
7. What is revealed by his prayer before he goes to Micah? (pp 16)

## Chapter 2

8. Does Anam's sense of receiving Divine guidance erase all his doubts? How does the author show that he is moving from doubt to resolution in the midst of doubt? Is this mental and spiritual state and movement something we can relate to? (pp 19, 20; discussion)
9. The author crystallizes the Messianic expectation (see Luke 3: 15) among Jews of this time in the person of Micah reading from the prophet Isaiah. Anam has come to ask a question of his father, only to find his father asking a question of Sacred Scripture. How do the father's comments about suffering form a bridge between the two questions? (pp. 22)
10. Anam's real name and family origin are unknown. His father says about the circumstance under which he found Anam, "the scene was a mystery to me." To Anam his lack of a known personal history is a matter of shame, something that propels him to search for an answer. In this, how is Anam "Everyman," especially considered in the light of the following excerpt from *Fides et Ratio*? (pp 23-29, discussion)

*In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply. It is a journey which has unfolded—as it must—within the horizon of personal self-consciousness: the more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and of their very existence becoming ever more pressing. This is why all that is the object of our knowledge becomes a part of our life. The admonition Know yourself was carved on the temple portal at Delphi, as testimony to a basic truth to be adopted as a minimal norm by those who seek to set themselves apart from the rest of creation as "human beings", that is as those who "know themselves".*

*Moreover, a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the*

*(Excerpt continued on following page.)*

*poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives—*

Excerpt from the introduction to Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason) Encyclical of Pope John Paul II.

***Recommended Closing Meditation:***

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we also carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.—This is an excerpt from the famous passage from St. Augustine's Confessions (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5) used in the Roman Office of readings for the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary time with the accompanying biblical reading of Job 28:1-28.

*Lord, please guide our Advent journey  
and prepare our restless hearts to welcome the Incarnate Word.*

Pray an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary* and a *Glory Be*

***Preparation for Next Week***

Prior to the study group's second meeting, all participants should read *The Shepherds' Prayer*: chapters 3-4 (pp. 31-60).

## WEEK 2

### *Chapter 3*

1. What questions are consuming Anam as he sets out on his journey to Bethlehem? Have you ever asked similar questions? Is it normal to wonder if we matter to God? How do we see Anam once again moving through doubt to resolution in the midst of doubt? (pp 31-34)
2. Through the emotional words of Johanan, the author, Richard M. Barry, calls us to reflection on the fact that the joyful story of Christmas was marred by great sorrow visited upon Bethlehem and the surrounding area with the death of the male infants at the cruel order of Herod. For many of us also Christmas may be tinged with memories that cause pain. Reflect on the difference between forced "happiness" that denies real sorrow and true joy that carries us through sorrow. Are any in our study group bearing particular sorrows this Christmas? (pp 45-46)

### *Chapter 4*

3. Read these passages from Sacred Scripture about shepherds:

On Abel: Genesis 4: 1-9; Luke 11:50, 51; Heb. 11:4

On Moses: Exodus 3: 1-2; Deuteronomy 18.15-19

On David: 1 Samuel 16: 4-13; 17: 33-37; 1 Chronicles 11: 1-3

On God as a Shepherd to His People: Ezekiel 34: 11, 35; John 10: 11-15

Considering the role of shepherds in salvation history, was it fitting that the Shepherds of Bethlehem should be the very ones to have the Christmas message declared to them by a heavenly messenger? (discussion)

4. Had you ever before considered the effect of the angelic announcement on the subsequent day-to-day lives of the shepherds of Bethlehem? How does the author portray the complexity of their situation and their attitudes toward it? (pp 54-59)
5. Since he left Bethlehem to search for the shepherds how has Anam's heart been further prepared to hear their message? (pp 50-52; 56-57 )

***Recommended Closing Meditation:***

Psalm 23

L. The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want;

**R. The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.**

He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters;

He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

**R. The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.**

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

**R. The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.**

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

**R. The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.**

Lord, please shepherd us on our Advent journey and give us the faith of the shepherds of Bethlehem that we may hear and believe the Good News of Great Joy.

Pray an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary* and a *Glory Be* especially for the intentions of those who bear Christmas heartaches.

***Preparation for Next Week***

Prior to the study group's third meeting, all participants should read *The Shepherds' Prayer*: chapters 5-6 (pp 63-92).

## WEEK 3

### *Chapter 5*

1. The journey of faith begins with questions and the response of God to our questions is to send witnesses into the world. Recall any witnesses to faith in Christ who had a particular impact on your faith journey.
2. Anam's journey has brought him to the point of listening with an open heart and mind to the eyewitness accounts of the shepherds? Consider how the author makes the shepherds stand in for the Apostles whose witness would later be the foundation of the Church.

Compare p. 66 par 4 with Luke 8: 1.

Compare p. 71 par 1 with Matthew 4: 18-22

Compare p. 72 par 5 and p. 73. par. 8 with Matthew 14:31, 32.

Compare p. 74 par 3 with John 14: 25, 25; 15: 26, 27 and Matthew 13: 16, 17

Compare p. 74 par 4 with Revelation 21: 9, 10, 14

Compare p. 74 par 5 with Matthew 28: 19, 20

Compare p. 74 par 7 with 1 John 1-3

Compare p. 75 with Matthew 28: 5-7

3. Consider Mary's personal interest in the shepherds and the way they address her in light of Revelation 12: 1, 17.

### *Chapter 6*

4. Anam goes through a profound conversion after he hears the testimony of the shepherds (Romans 10: 17). The author lets us in on his mental state as he moves through the process of accepting the truth he has heard. Try to identify the stages he goes through from pages 77-80 and relate them to your own experience, if pertinent.

Confused by the controversy surrounding Jesus.

Wondering if the testimony of the witnesses can be believed.

Impressed by the sincerity of the believers.

Seeking some logical alternative explanation.

Fearful of the changes and challenges that the truth might bring.

Coming at last to acceptance.

Wishing God would give miraculous confirmation.

5. Discuss how Anam's questions of identity and belonging intersect with his memory of the girl he loved but could not marry. (pp 81-83)
6. If Anam's real name is revealed when he shows the old shepherd the sheepskin, why do you think the author continues to call him "Anam"? (p 86)

7. The old shepherd's tale about Anam's real father looking through the Jewish Scripture to confirm the identity of the Messiah mirrors the earlier scene of his foster father reading from Isaiah. What story is Anam trying to puzzle out, but what story is God drawing his attention to? (pp 89-92)

***Recommended Closing Meditation:***

Read the words of Jesus in paragraph 2 and 3 of page 122 as He speaks to those gathered.

Pray: Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts; that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord. (From the Angelus)

Pray an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary* and a *Glory Be* especially for the intentions of those who are on the path from confusion to faith.

***Preparation for Next Week***

Prior to the study group's fourth meeting, all participants should read *The Shepherds' Prayer*: chapters 7-8 and the "Word from the Author" (pp 95-125).

## WEEK 4

### *Chapter 7*

1. Why has Anam's new found knowledge of his origins not settled his heart? (p 96)
2. What doubts fill Anam's mind and what is he looking for? Have you ever sought for your own reason to believe what your parents told you about the Catholic faith? (p 97)
3. Anam's reading of Issachar's testimony parallels and deepens the opening of the book where Micah is pondering Isaiah's prophecy? What role does the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies play in your own faith in Christ? (p 96; Catechism of the Catholic Church 601, below; discussion)

The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of "the righteous one, my Servant" as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin. Citing a confession of faith that he himself had "received", St. Paul professes that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." In particular Jesus' redemptive death fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering Servant. Indeed Jesus himself explained the meaning of his life and death in the light of God's suffering Servant. After his Resurrection he gave this interpretation of the Scriptures to the disciples at Emmaus, and then to the apostles (CCC 601).

4. As Anam's questions focus more on the person of Christ, he finds out that Jesus is close by. Have you sought Jesus, only to discover that He was close at hand? (p 107)

### *Chapter 8*

5. Why does Jesus want to hear the stories the shepherds tell? How does his conversation with them reveal His humanity and His divinity? (pp 111-118)
6. How was the announcement of Jesus' birth to humble shepherds an appropriate lesson for those two disciples in particular? (pp 114-115; Matthew 20: 20-28)
7. Why does the author make Jesus the first to call Anam by his real name? (p 120)

### ***A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR***

8. The story began with Anam/Stephen, lonely and isolated at a wedding feast. How is the story of Stephen's martyrdom the perfect resolution to that beginning?
9. How do the shepherds and Stephen inspire us as we enter the Christmas season?

***Recommended Closing Meditation:***

Read the words of Jesus in paragraph 2 and 3 of page 122 as He speaks to those gathered.

Pray an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary* and a *Glory Be* for the intention of a holy and blessed Christmas celebration by the families of all present.