

The Gospel of Heidi by Fr. Ray Ball

One of my greatest childhood hopes was fulfilled in the summer of 1973, at the new home our family had recently moved into in Marcellus NY, a small town just west of Syracuse. It was the day my father brought home a dog for our family! I was 12 years old at the time, and it seemed like forever that I had been asking and pleading and praying for one – ever since I knew that such wonderful creatures existed and were allowed to share the same homes as people. Bringing a dog home, however, wasn't done without some major diplomacy on the part of my father, since my mother did not care in the least for such wild, ferocious beasts sharing her living space! It would not take long, however, for this new arrival to win over even her non-dog-loving heart.

The years of feeling deprived for not having a dog were quickly forgotten. She was not only a dog like I wanted, but also my favorite breed of dog: a pure bred German shepherd. The dog even had the perfect name for a German shepherd – Heidi. She was one year old, and full of the life and energy to match the energy of any group of kids, including myself and my brother and sister. After about six months of playing and running and learning new tricks, however, Heidi appeared to be rapidly putting on weight. After a visit to the vet it was confirmed – Heidi was pregnant! “Awesome!” I said. “Oh no!” said my mother. It was on a wintry December day that the puppies started arriving one after another, after another, after another ... until, all told, 15 new puppies – 12 males and 3 females - had arrived! Praying for one dog and ending up with 16, wow, the Lord is generous indeed!

Immediately we had to build a pen for Heidi and her puppies, something we accomplished by putting the two ends of a ping-pong table against a wall in the basement, with a large plank in the front, making it impossible for any puppy to escape. Needless to say, Heidi had her paws full. How would this young 1½-year-old mother respond to the needs of 15 puppies constantly craving her for attention and food? As a youngster I had no problems assisting Heidi giving her puppies attention by playing with them and feeding them with milk with old baby bottles. Of course whenever Heidi would step into the pen, she would immediately be mobbed by her puppies eager to nurse, climbing over each other to get to their mom. Of the 15 puppies, however, there was one that was having a considerably difficult time competing. She was the runt of the litter, significantly smaller than the others. She would always get trampled over and knocked out of the way by the other puppies attempting to nurse.

One morning we went down to the basement to discover Heidi in the pen, as usual, nursing her puppies. From the other side of the basement, however, we heard cries from the runt of the litter. She was whimpering as she lay by herself in a pile of laundry next to the washing machine. “Oh no!” we thought, “Heidi is trying to get rid of this puppy!” Since we knew there was no way this puppy could have gotten out of the pen by itself, we knew it must have been Heidi's doing. In this dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest world, Heidi must have realized that this weak pup would not be able to make it. Instead of spending her time and limited resources on this one when she had 14 other healthy ones to tend to, she must be trying to discard it. “How sad!” and “Bad dog!” we thought. We placed the small puppy back in the pen with Heidi, hoping she would take it back. The next morning, however, we discovered the same situation. Heidi was in the pen nursing her puppies, while the small puppy was crying, forlorn and forsaken, all by itself in the laundry pile on the other side of the basement. Again we returned this puppy to the pen with her mother. We would soon discover what was really going on.

The next morning when we came down the stairs into the basement, there was Heidi lying in the pile of clothes next to the washing machine nursing the small puppy one on one. Heidi hadn't been trying to get rid of this little puppy after all! She had been taking it out of the pen away from her bigger and healthier brothers and sisters to give it the special attention and care that it needed. Amazingly, out of the mass of 15 squirming, yelping puppies craving her attention, she was able to take notice of this little one. Having 14 out of 15 healthy puppies wasn't good enough for her. Just like the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep out on the hill because he cares for the one lost sheep, this Good German Shepherd would leave her other 14 puppies to care for this one puppy. “Wow”, I thought, “this 1½-year-old German Shepherd follows that Gospel better than many people. What a great lesson!” Just as a piece of art expresses something of the artist who creates it, so did this dog in her own way express something of the one who had created her.

While I wished we could have kept all of those puppies, we at least ended up finding homes for all of them, until at last we were left with only Heidi. She would now be able to get some well-deserved rest. She would, however; only live another six more months until, at the age of 2, she was accidentally run over by our family car driven by my mother. My mother felt worse than anyone. Thanks to Heidi she had become a converted dog lover. A month later we would get another German shepherd dog which we named Heidi II. She would live to the ripe old age of 16. One of the first things we did when we got her was to have her spayed, because there are certain Gospel lessons you should only have to learn once!