

THOU^{ART} PETER

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II JUBILEE FOR THE ROMAN CURIA Tuesday, 22 February 2000



1. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (Mt 16: 18).

As pilgrims we have passed through the Holy Door of the Vatican Basilica, and now the Word of God draws our attention to what Christ said to Peter and of Peter.

We are gathered around the Altar of the Confession, above the Apostle's tomb, and our assembly is composed of that special community of service known as the Roman Curia. The "ministerium petrinum", that is, the service proper to the Bishop of Rome, in which each of you is called to collaborate in your own area of work, unites us in one family and inspires our prayer at the solemn moment that the Roman Curia is observing today, the feast of the Chair of St Peter.

All of us, and I myself first of all, are deeply touched by the words of the Gospel just proclaimed: "You are the Christ... You are Peter" (Mt 16: 16, 18). In this basilica, a memorial to the martyrdom of the Fisherman from Galilee, they echo with extraordinary eloquence, enhanced by the intense spiritual climate of the Jubilee of the 2,000th anniversary of the Incarnation.

2. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16: 16): this is the confession of faith made by the Prince of the Apostles. This is also the confession we renew today, venerable Brother Cardinals, Bishops and priests, together with all of you, dear men and women religious and laity, who offer your appreciated collaboration in the Roman Curia. We repeat the Apostle's clear words with particular feeling today as we celebrate our special Jubilee.

Christ's response echoes forcefully in our hearts: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (Mt 16: 18). The Evangelist John testifies that Jesus gave Simon the name "Cephas" at their first meeting, when his brother Andrew had brought him to him (cf. Jn 1: 41-42).

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On the other hand, Matthew's account puts the greatest emphasis on Christ's action by situating it at an important moment in the messianic ministry of Jesus, who explains the significance of the name "Peter" by relating it to the building of his Church.

"You are the Christ": the Church is founded on Peter's profession of faith and on Jesus' subsequent declaration: "You are Peter". An invincible foundation, against which the forces of evil can never prevail: this foundation is safeguarded by the very will of the "Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16: 17). The Chair of Peter, which we celebrate today, is not based on human assurances - "flesh and blood" - but on Christ, the cornerstone. And like Simon, we too are "blessed", for we know we have no reason to boast except in the eternal and providential plan of God.

3. "I myself will search for my sheep ... and will seek them out" (Ez 34: 11). The first reading, from the well-known oracle of the prophet Ezekiel about the shepherds of Israel, forcefully recalls the pastoral nature of the Petrine ministry. It is this aspect that is reflected in the nature and service of the Roman Curia, whose mission is to collaborate with the Successor of Peter in carrying out the task entrusted to him by Christ of tending his sheep.

"I myself will search for my sheep, and I will make them lie down" (Ez 34: 11, 15). "I myself ": these are the most important words, for they express God's determination to take the initiative in personally caring for his people. We know that the promise - "I myself " - came true. It came true in the fullness of time, when God sent his Son, the Good Shepherd, to feed his flock "in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord" (Mi 5: 4). He sent him to gather into one the dispersed children of God by offering himself as the lamb, the meek victim of expiation, on the altar of the Cross.

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It is this model of the Shepherd which Peter and the other Apostles learned to recognize and imitate by being with Jesus and sharing in his messianic ministry (cf. Mk 3: 14-15). We hear an echo of it in the second reading, in which Peter calls himself "a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed" (1 Pt 5: 1). Peter the shepherd is totally moulded by Jesus the Shepherd and by the dynamism of his paschal mystery. The "Petrine ministry" is rooted in this unique conformation to Christ the Shepherd on the part of Peter and his Successors, a conformation which is based on a special charism of love: "Do you love me more than these? ... Feed my lambs" (Jn 21: 15).

4. On an occasion such as this, the Successor of Peter cannot forget what happened before Christ's Passion in the Garden of Olives after the Last Supper. None of the Apostles seemed to realize what was about to happen and Jesus knew that well: he knew he had to go there to watch and to pray, and thus prepare for "his hour", the hour of his death on the Cross.

He had told the Apostles: "You will all fall away; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"" (Mk 14: 27). And Peter replied: "Even though they all fall away, I will not" (Mk 14: 29). Never will I fall away, never will I leave you.... And Jesus said to him: "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" (Mk 14: 30). "If I must die with you, I will not deny you" (Mk 14: 31), Peter replied vehemently and the other Apostles with him. And Jesus said: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22: 31-32).

This is Christ's promise, our consoling certainty: the Petrine ministry is not founded on human abilities and strengths, but on the prayer of Christ who implores the Father that Simon's faith "may not fail" (Lk 22: 32). When he has "turned again", Peter will be able to carry out his service among his brethren. The Apostle's repentance - we could almost say his second conversion - becomes the decisive turning point on his journey of following the Lord.

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5. Dear brothers and sisters who are taking part in this Jubilee celebration for the Roman Curia, Christ's words to Peter must never be forgotten. Our passing through the Holy Door to receive the grace of the Great Jubilee must be inspired by a deep spirit of conversion. We are helped in this by Peter's example, his experience of human weakness which led him, shortly after the conversation with Jesus just recounted, to forget the promises he had made with such insistence and to deny his Lord. Despite his sin and limitations, Christ chose him and called him to a most high task: that of being the foundation of the Church's visible unity and of strengthening his brethren in the faith.

The decisive moment occurred on the night between the Thursday and Friday of the Passion. Christ, led out of the high priest's house, looked directly at Peter. The Apostle, who had just denied him three times, was struck by that gaze and understood everything. He remembered the Master's words and felt pierced to the heart. "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22: 62).

We are so deeply moved by Peter's tears as to be spurred to an authentic inner purification. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord", he exclaimed one day after the miraculous catch (Lk 5: 8). Dear brothers and sisters, let us make Peter's invocation our own, as we celebrate our holy Jubilee. Christ will renew his wonders for us too, we hope with humble trust: he will grant us a superabundance of his healing grace and will work new miraculous catches, filled with promise for the Church's mission in the third millennium.

Blessed Virgin, who accompanied the first steps of the newborn Church with your prayer, watch over our Jubilee journey. Grant that, like Peter, we may experience Christ's continual support. Help us to live our mission of service to the Gospel in fidelity and joy, as we await the glorious return of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever..

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ST. PETER AND THE KEYS POPE ST. LEO THE GREAT - EARLY CHURCH FATHER & DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH



This excerpt from a sermon by Pope St. Leo the Great (Sermo 4 de natali ipsius, 2-3: PL 54, 149-151) is used in the Roman Office of Readings for the Feast of the Chair of Peter on February 22. This liturgical celebration of Peter's special authority over the universal Church was celebrated in Rome from at least the 4th century. Pope Leo's sermon dates from the middle of the fifth century.

Out of the whole world one man, Peter, is chosen to preside at the calling of all nations, and to be set over all the apostles and all the fathers of the Church. Though there are in God's people many shepherds, Peter is thus appointed to rule in his own person those whom Christ also rules as the original ruler. Beloved, how great and wonderful is this sharing of his power that God in his goodness has given to this man. Whatever Christ has willed to be shared in common by Peter and the other leaders of the Church, it is only through Peter that he has given to others what he has not refused to bestow on them.

The Lord now asks the apostles as a whole what men think of him. As long as they are recounting the uncertainty born of human ignorance, their reply is always the same.

But when he presses the disciples to say what they think themselves, the first to confess his faith in the Lord is the one who is first in rank among the apostles.

Peter says: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". Jesus replies: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but my Father who is in heaven". You are blessed, he means, because my Father has taught you. You have not been deceived by earthly opinion, but have been enlightened by inspiration from heaven. It was not flesh and blood that pointed me out to you, but the one whose only-begotten Son I am.

He continues: And I say to you. In other words, as my Father has revealed to you my godhead, so I in my turn

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make known to you your pre-eminence. You are Peter: though I am the inviolable rock, the cornerstone that makes both one, the foundation apart from which no one can lay any other, yet you also are a rock, for you are given solidity by my strength, so that which is my very own because of my power is common between us through your participation.

And upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. On this strong foundation, he says, I will build an everlasting temple. The great height of my Church, which is to penetrate the heavens, shall rise on the firm foundation of this faith.

The gates of hell shall not silence this confession of faith; the chains of death shall not bind it. Its words are the words of life. As they lift up to heaven those who profess them, so they send down to hell those who contradict them.

Blessed Peter is therefore told: To you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth is also bound in heaven. Whatever you lose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven.

The authority vested in this power passed also to the other apostles, and the institution established by this decree has been continued in all the leaders of the Church. But it is not without good reason that what is bestowed on all is entrusted to one. For Peter received it separately in trust because he is the prototype set before all the rulers of the Church.