

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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Received August 17th, 2020

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 16:13–20. This is the famous passage in which Peter professes the identity of Jesus and receives the commission to be the “Rock” on which the Church is founded. The dialogue between Jesus and Peter offers several points for our reflection as disciples who are called to profess our faith in Jesus as well.

It is interesting that Jesus first asks His disciples a question about popular opinion when He inquires, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” There are a variety of opinions about who Jesus might be, but none of them are necessarily true. Finally, Jesus poses the question as an address to the disciples themselves when He asks, “Who do you say that I am?” That is a personal and decisive moment of faith. It is no longer a matter of public opinion about what others are saying; now it is whom the disciples themselves believe Jesus to be. It is in the midst of that confusion of faith and diverse opinions that Peter clarifies what is true and trustworthy as he confesses Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the Living God”. Throughout the centuries disciples have continued to face moments when there have been questions of faith and Christian life (morals) as well. Certainly we experience such questions in our time. People today search for truth just as much as ever with the age-old questions, “What can I believe?” “What should I do?” and “What can I hope for?” When faced with such uncertainties, we should seek true faith by listening to the voice of Peter articulating for us the truth about Jesus even as he clarified it for the other disciples at Caesarea Philippi. One way in which Catholics (especially) hear the voice of Peter today is through the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome. An important role of the Holy Father (Pope) is to preserve the faith of the Church from error. Questions such as “Who is Jesus?” “What is the way to salvation?” “What should a disciple do?” and so forth, are constantly being raised in today’s culture of secularism, relativism, and religious pluralism. Many of the common opinions on these issues are simply not true. For Christians, truth is not determined by public opinion but by divine revelation. When disciples allow their faith to be formed by public opinion, they have surrendered themselves to the whims of passing times.

Where do you go to find truth when you encounter questions of faith in your life?

What is something the Holy Father, the Successor of Peter, has said or done today to bring clarity to the Christian faith for you?

Why is it important to distinguish between the Holy Father speaking with the authority of faith as opposed to expressing his personal opinion?

How do you draw that distinction?

What are the current issues of faith or morals that need to be clarified through the voice of Peter in the Church today?

How do you see erroneous popular opinion negatively influencing Christians today and eroding their faith?

Peter’s answer to Jesus’ question wasn’t the end of that conversation of faith. Rather, it was really the beginning. In response to that correct answer of faith, Jesus does two things. First, our Lord changes the name of “Simon” to “Peter” (Rock). Second, Jesus gives Peter a role in the life of the Church. This dynamic is teaching us important insights for our discipleship. The first insight teaches us that every conversation of faith in which we come to know and confess Jesus more clearly should change us as well. When we profess Jesus as Lord, we are acknowledging that we are His subjects and not the subjects of any temporal authority or worldly power. When we profess Jesus as Savior, we are acknowledging

ourselves as sinners who need a deliverance and redemption from the oppressive forces of sin that enslave and deceive us. When we profess Jesus as creator, we are acknowledging that everything we are is a gift from Him, even life itself, and that we are only stewards of the many blessings God has entrusted to us. When we profess Jesus to be the Good Shepherd, we are acknowledging that we are His sheep and that we willingly refuse to follow anyone else who tries to lead us astray. The important point is this — anything we say about Jesus changes us because of our relationship to Him. The beauty of prayer is that we come to know ourselves more clearly as we come to know Jesus more clearly.

*How has your growth in Christian faith changed you?
Which title of Jesus do you find most appealing and what does that say about you?
Who has noticed a change in you as a result of your ongoing conversation with Christ in discipleship?*

The second insight is revealed when Jesus gives Peter a distinctive role (ministry) in the life of the Church. Specifically, Jesus assigns Peter the role of being the Chief Steward as the one who holds the keys to the Kingdom. He is also to be the one who “binds and looses”, which was a rabbinical term used to describe the work of interpreting the Torah (Scriptures) and setting rules for the community. In short, Peter’s confession of faith ended up giving Peter both a new identity and a new mission. The same commissioning is meant to happen for us as well every time we deepen our relationship of love and knowledge for the Lord. We all have a role to play in the ministry of the Church. If we are sitting on the sidelines watching “Church” happen but are not involved in it, we haven’t been listening very well in our prayer. God has a mission for each of us in the work of the Gospel. To know Jesus is to work for Jesus. If our faith is only a matter of intellectual assent or emotional feeling but not active engagement in the work of the Gospel, we have not yet discovered the fullness of relationship to which Christ is calling us. It is when our faith motivates us to mission that we can be confident of the authenticity of our encounter with the Lord. This externally manifested change in both identity and ministry are signs of authentic religious experience.

*How has your involvement in mission increased along with your growth in faith?
How have you encountered the Lord by being involved in a particular work of ministry?
What is a work of ministry you think God is calling you to, but you don’t know how to respond?
Why is it that some people seem indifferent or deaf to hearing the Lord’s guidance in a conversation of faith?*

Finally, Jesus cautions Peter to not misunderstand the nature of His Messiahship. The reality is that the Church will be caught up in an ongoing struggle with the forces of evil (Hades). This struggle will continue throughout history, and there will never be a perfect time in this world when there are no forces opposing Christian disciples. We may face this struggle constantly but always with the assurance that the forces of evil will not prevail. The struggle may endure, but the ultimate victory has already been accomplished by Jesus in His triumph over the forces of sin and death through the resurrection. As the common expression states, the war may be won but the battles continue.

*When has the Church faced the greatest threat from the powers of evil?
How does the power of evil threaten the Church today?
What are the temptations Evil uses to erode people’s faith?
Why do you think Evil continues to attack the Church even though Jesus accomplished a definitive victory through His cross and resurrection?
How does our Lord’s insight about the ongoing struggle with Evil give you insight, hope, and encouragement as a disciple?*

There are several quotes from C.S. Lewis' writing entitled *The Screwtape Letters* that offer particular insights into this conversation between Peter and Jesus. This insightful writing explains how Evil tries to lead us away from God. In order to understand these quotes, it is important to remember that the statements are part of an exchange between two agents of evil discussing how to lead humans astray: the tempter, Wormwood, and his uncle, Screwtape.

"[M]an has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false," but as "academic" or "practical," "outworn" or "contemporary," "conventional" or "ruthless." Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true! Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous — that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about."

"It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out."

"It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." ^[1]

Which quote from C.S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters struck you in a particular way, and why?

^[1] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, New York: Harper Collins, 2002, pp. 185-186.