



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 17 May 2006*

## **Peter, the fisherman**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the new series of Catecheses, we have tried above all to understand better what the Church is and what idea the Lord has about this new family of his. Then we said that the Church exists in people, and we have seen that the Lord entrusted this new reality, the Church, to the Twelve Apostles. Let us now look at them one by one, to understand through these people what it means to experience the Church and what it means to follow Jesus. We begin with St Peter.

After Jesus, Peter is the figure best known and most frequently cited in the New Testament writings: he is mentioned 154 times with the nickname of *Pétros*, "rock", which is the Greek translation of the Aramaic name Jesus gave him directly: *Cephas*, attested to nine times, especially in Paul's Letters; then the frequently occurring name *Simon* (75 times) must be added; this is a hellenization of his original Hebrew name "Symeon" (twice: Acts 15: 14; II Pt 1: 1).

Son of John (cf. Jn 1: 42) or, in the Aramaic form, "Bar-Jona, son of Jona" (cf. Mt 16: 17), Simon was from Bethsaida (cf. Jn 1: 44), a little town to the east of the Sea of Galilee, from which Philip also came and of course, Andrew, the brother of Simon.

He spoke with a Galilean accent. Like his brother, he too was a fisherman: with the family of Zebedee, the father of James and John, he ran a small fishing business on the Lake of Gennesaret (cf. Lk 5: 10). Thus, he must have been reasonably well-off and was motivated by a sincere interest in religion, by a desire for God - he wanted God to intervene in the world -, a

desire that impelled him to go with his brother as far as Judea to hear the preaching of John the Baptist (Jn 1: 35-42).

He was a believing and practising Jew who trusted in the active presence of God in his people's history and grieved not to see God's powerful action in the events he was witnessing at that time. He was married and his mother-in-law, whom Jesus was one day to heal, lived in the city of Capernaum, in the house where Simon also stayed when he was in that town (cf. Mt 8: 14ff.; Mk 1: 29ff.; Lk 4: 38ff.).

Recent archaeological excavations have brought to light, beneath the octagonal mosaic paving of a small Byzantine church, the remains of a more ancient church built in that house, as the graffiti with invocations to Peter testify.

The Gospels tell us that Peter was one of the first four disciples of the Nazarene (cf. Lk 5: 1-11), to whom a fifth was added, complying with the custom of every Rabbi to have five disciples (cf. Lk 5: 27: called Levi). When Jesus went from five disciples to 12 (cf. Lk 9: 1-6), the newness of his mission became evident: he was not one of the numerous rabbis but had come to gather together the eschatological Israel, symbolized by the number 12, the number of the tribes of Israel.

Simon appears in the Gospels with a determined and impulsive character: he is ready to assert his own opinions even with force (remember him using the sword in the Garden of Olives: cf. Jn 18: 10ff.). At the same time he is also ingenuous and fearful, yet he is honest, to the point of the most sincere repentance (cf. Mt 26: 75).

The Gospels enable us to follow Peter step by step on his spiritual journey. The starting point was Jesus' call. It happened on an ordinary day while Peter was busy with his fisherman's tasks. Jesus was at the Lake of Gennesaret and crowds had gathered around him to listen to him. The size of his audience created a certain discomfort. The Teacher saw two boats moored by the shore; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. He then asked permission to board the boat, which was Simon's, and requested him to put out a little from the land. Sitting on that improvised seat, he began to teach the crowds from the boat (cf. Lk 5: 1-3). Thus, the boat of Peter becomes the chair of Jesus.

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon: "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch". And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets" (Lk 5: 4-5). Jesus, a carpenter, was not a skilled fisherman: yet Simon the fisherman trusted this Rabbi, who did not give him answers but required him to trust him.

His reaction to the miraculous catch showed his amazement and fear: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5: 8). Jesus replied by inviting him to trust and to be open to a project that would surpass all his expectations. "Do not be afraid; henceforth, you will be catching men" (Lk

5: 10). Peter could not yet imagine that one day he would arrive in Rome and that here he would be a "fisher of men" for the Lord. He accepted this surprising call, he let himself be involved in this great adventure: he was generous; he recognized his limits but believed in the one who was calling him and followed the dream of his heart. He said "yes", a courageous and generous "yes", and became a disciple of Jesus.

Peter was to live another important moment of his spiritual journey near Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked the disciples a precise question: "Who do men say that I am?" (Mk 8: 27). But for Jesus hearsay did not suffice. He wanted from those who had agreed to be personally involved with him a personal statement of their position. Consequently, he insisted: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8: 29).

It was Peter who answered on behalf of the others: "You are the Christ" (*ibid.*), that is, the Messiah. Peter's answer, which was not revealed to him by "flesh and blood" but was given to him by the Father who is in heaven (cf. Mt 16: 17), contains as in a seed the future confession of faith of the Church. However, Peter had not yet understood the profound content of Jesus' Messianic mission, the new meaning of this word: Messiah.

He demonstrates this a little later, inferring that the Messiah whom he is following in his dreams is very different from God's true plan. He was shocked by the Lord's announcement of the Passion and protested, prompting a lively reaction from Jesus (cf. Mk 8: 32-33).

Peter wanted as Messiah a "divine man" who would fulfil the expectations of the people by imposing his power upon them all: we would also like the Lord to impose his power and transform the world instantly. Jesus presented himself as a "human God", the Servant of God, who turned the crowd's expectations upside-down by taking a path of humility and suffering.

This is the great alternative that we must learn over and over again: to give priority to our own expectations, rejecting Jesus, or to accept Jesus in the truth of his mission and set aside all too human expectations.

Peter, impulsive as he was, did not hesitate to take Jesus aside and rebuke him. Jesus' answer demolished all his false expectations, calling him to conversion and to follow him: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mk 8: 33). It is not for you to show me the way; I take my own way and you should follow me.

Peter thus learned what following Jesus truly means. It was his second call, similar to Abraham's in Genesis 22, after that in Genesis 12: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (Mk 8: 34-35). This is the demanding rule of the following of Christ: one must be able, if necessary, to give up the whole world to save the true

values, to save the soul, to save the presence of God in the world (cf. Mk 8: 36-37). And though with difficulty, Peter accepted the invitation and continued his life in the Master's footsteps.

And it seems to me that these conversions of St Peter on different occasions, and his whole figure, are a great consolation and a great lesson for us. We too have a desire for God, we too want to be generous, but we too expect God to be strong in the world and to transform the world on the spot, according to our ideas and the needs that we perceive.

God chooses a different way. God chooses the way of the transformation of hearts in suffering and in humility. And we, like Peter, must convert, over and over again. We must follow Jesus and not go before him: it is he who shows us the way.

So it is that Peter tells us: You think you have the recipe and that it is up to you to transform Christianity, but it is the Lord who knows the way. It is the Lord who says to me, who says to you: follow me! And we must have the courage and humility to follow Jesus, because he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

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### **To special groups**

I greet all the English-speaking visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke an abundance of joy and peace in the Risen Lord. May your stay in Rome be a happy one, filled with grace and blessings!

Finally, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*, exhorting all to intensify the pious practice of the Holy Rosary, especially in this month of May dedicated to the Mother of God.

I invite you, dear *young people*, to utilize this traditional Marian prayer which helps us to understand better the central moments of the salvation brought about by Christ. I encourage you, dear *sick people*, to turn with trust to Our Lady through this pious exercise, entrusting to her all of your needs. Dear *newly-weds*, I wish you may make use of the recitation of the Rosary in your family as a moment of spiritual growth under the maternal gaze of the Virgin Mary.

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