



# The Holy See

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CAPPELLA PAPAIE ON THE SOLEMNITY OF STS PETER AND PAUL

*HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

*St Peter's Basilica*

*Thursday, 29 June 2006*

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

What exactly was the Lord saying to Peter with these words? With them, what promise did he make to Peter and what task did he entrust to him? And what is he saying to us - to the Bishop of Rome, who is seated on the chair of Peter, and to the Church today?

If we want to understand the meaning of Jesus' words, it is useful to remember that the Gospels recount for us three different situations in which the Lord, each time in a special way, transmits to Peter his future task. The task is always the same, but what the Lord was and is concerned with becomes clearer to us from the diversity of the situations and images used.

In the *Gospel according to St Matthew* that we have just heard, Peter makes his own confession to Jesus, recognizing him as the Messiah and Son of God. On the basis of this, his special task is conferred upon him through three images: the rock that becomes the foundation or cornerstone, the keys, and the image of binding and loosing.

I do not intend here to interpret once again these three images that the Church down the ages has explained over and over again; rather, I would like to call attention to the geographical place and chronological context of these words.

The promise is made at the sources of the Jordan, on the boundary of the Judaic Land, on the frontiers of the pagan world. The moment of the promise marks a crucial turning-point in Jesus'

journey: the Lord now sets out for Jerusalem and for the first time, he tells the disciples that this journey to the Holy City is the journey to the Cross: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Mt 16: 21).

Both these things go together and determine the inner place of the Primacy, indeed, of the Church in general: the Lord is continuously on his way towards the Cross, towards the lowliness of the servant of God, suffering and killed, but at the same time he is also on the way to the immensity of the world in which he precedes us as the Risen One, so that the light of his words and the presence of his love may shine forth in the world; he is on the way so that through him, the Crucified and Risen Christ, God himself, may arrive in the world.

In this regard, Peter describes himself in his First Letter as "a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed" (I Pt 5: 1). For the Church, Good Friday and Easter have always existed together; she is always both the mustard seed and the tree in whose boughs the birds of the air make their nests.

The Church - and in her, Christ - still suffers today. In her, Christ is again and again taunted and slapped; again and again an effort is made to reject him from the world. Again and again the little barque of the Church is ripped apart by the winds of ideologies, whose waters seep into her and seem to condemn her to sink. Yet, precisely in the suffering Church, Christ is victorious.

In spite of all, faith in him recovers ever new strength. The Lord also commands the waters today and shows that he is the Lord of the elements. He stays in his barque, in the little boat of the Church.

Thus, on the one hand, the weakness proper to human beings is revealed in Peter's ministry, but at the same time, also God's power: in the weakness of human beings itself the Lord shows his strength; he demonstrates that it is through frail human beings that he himself builds his Church.

Let us now turn to the *Gospel according to St Luke*, which tells us that during the Last Supper, the Lord once again confers a special task upon Peter (cf. Lk 22: 31-33). This time, the Lord's words addressed to Simon are found immediately after the Institution of the Most Blessed Eucharist. The Lord has just given himself to his followers under the species of bread and wine. We can see the Institution of the Eucharist as the true and proper founding act of the Church.

Through the Eucharist, the Lord not only gives himself to his own but also gives them the reality of a new communion among themselves which is extended in time, "until he comes" (cf. I Cor 11: 26).

Through the Eucharist, the disciples become his living dwelling place which, as history unfolds, grows like the new and living temple of God in this world. Thus, immediately after the Institution of

the Sacrament, Jesus speaks of what being disciples, of what the "ministry", means in the new community: he says that it is a commitment of service, just as he himself is among them as One who serves.

And then he addresses Peter. He says that Satan has demanded to have him so that he may sift him like wheat. This calls to mind the passage in the *Book of Job*, where Satan asks God for the power to afflict Job. The devil - the slanderer of God and men - thereby wants to prove that no true religious feeling exists, but that in man every aim is always solely utilitarian.

In the case of Job, God grants Satan the asked-for freedom precisely to be able by so doing to defend his creature - man - and himself. And this also happens with Jesus' disciples. God gives a certain liberty to Satan in all times.

To us it oftentimes seems that God allows Satan too much freedom, that he grants him the power to distress us too terribly; and that this gets the better of our forces and oppresses us too heavily. Again and again we cry out to God: "Alas, look at the misery of your disciples! Ah, protect us!". In fact, Jesus continues: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Lk 22: 32).

Jesus' prayer is the limit set upon the power of the devil. Jesus' prayer is the protection of the Church. We can seek refuge under this protection, cling on to it and be safe. But - as he says in the Gospel - Jesus prays in a particular way for Peter: "...that your faith may not fail".

Jesus' prayer is at the same time a promise and a duty. Jesus' prayer safeguards Peter's faith, that faith which he confessed at Caesarea Philippi: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16: 16). And so, never let this faith be silenced; strengthen it over and over again, even in the face of the cross and all the world's contradictions: this is Peter's task.

Therefore, the point is that the Lord does not only pray for Peter's personal faith, but for his faith as a service to others. This is exactly what he means with the words: "When you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22: 32).

"When you have turned again": these words are at the same time a prophecy and a promise. They prophesy the weakness of Simon, who was to deny to a maid and a servant that he knew Christ. Through this fall, Peter - and with him the Church of all times - has to learn that one's own strength alone does not suffice to build and guide the Lord's Church. No one succeeds on his or her own. However capable and clever Peter may seem - already at the first moment of trial he fails.

"When you have turned again": the Lord, who predicted his fall, also promises him conversion: "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter..." (Lk 22: 61). Jesus' look works the transformation and becomes Peter's salvation: "he went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22: 62).

Let us implore ever anew this saving gaze of Jesus: for all those who have responsibility in the Church; for all who suffer the bewilderment of these times; for the great and for the small: Lord, look at us ever anew, pick us up every time we fall and take us in your good hands.

It is through the promise of his prayer that the Lord entrusts to Peter the task for the brethren. Peter's responsibility is anchored in Jesus' prayer. It is this that gives him the certainty that he will persevere through all human miseries.

And the Lord entrusts this task to him in the context of the Supper, in connection with the gift of the Most Holy Eucharist. The Church, established in the institution of the Eucharist, in her inmost self is a Eucharistic community, hence, communion in the Body of the Lord. Peter's task is to preside over this universal communion; to keep it present in the world also as visible, incarnate unity. He, together with the whole Church of Rome - as St Ignatius of Antioch said -, must preside in charity: preside over the community with that love which comes from Christ and ever anew surpasses the limitations of the private sphere to bring God's love to the ends of the earth.

The third reference to the Primacy is found in the *Gospel according to St John* (21: 15-19). The Lord is risen, and as the Risen One he entrusts his flock to Peter. Here too, the Cross and the Resurrection are interconnected. Jesus predicts to Peter that he is to take the way of the Cross. In this Basilica built over the tomb of Peter - a tomb of the poor - we see that in this very way the Lord, through the Cross, is always victorious. His power is not a power according to the ways of this world. It is the power of goodness: of truth and of love, which is stronger than death.

Yes, his promise is true: the powers of death, the gates of hell, will not prevail against the Church which he built on Peter (cf. Mt 16: 18) and which he, in this very way, continues to build personally. On this Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, I address you especially, dear Metropolitans, who have come from many countries of the world to receive the Pallium from the Successor of Peter. I offer you a cordial greeting, together with all those who have accompanied you.

I also greet with special joy the delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, led by His Eminence Ioannis Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon and President of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholics and the Orthodox. I am grateful to Patriarch Bartholomew I and to the Holy Synod for this sign of brotherhood that demonstrates the desire and the commitment to progress more swiftly on the path of full unity that Christ invoked for all his disciples. We feel we share the ardent desire, once expressed by Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, to drink together from the same Cup and to eat together the Bread which is the Lord himself. Let us implore once again on this occasion that this gift may soon be granted to us.

And let us thank the Lord that we are united in the confession Peter made on behalf of all the disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". Let us together

bring this confession to the contemporary world.

May the Lord help us at this very moment in our history to be true witnesses of the sufferings of Christ as well as partakers in the glory that is to be revealed (cf. I Pt 5: 1). Amen.

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