

Third Sunday of Easter—Year C

“When Peter and the Apostles climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire...”

John is the only one in his gospel who uses the word “charcoal fire.” This is the second time he uses the word. The first time was a reference when Peter was warming his hands with some soldiers and maidens over the charcoal fire shortly after Jesus was captured. For Peter, seeing that charcoal fire, perhaps reminded him about the prediction Jesus made about him: before a cock crowed you would have denied Me three times. And we know that prediction came true. And how sorry he was after he had done it.

The Merciful Jesus gives him a chance to make that up by asking him questions three times whether he loves Him or not. And all three times, Peter responded with his yes.

The English version doesn’t really tell us what’s really happening in that dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Because in our language, there is only one word for “love”! Often times, when one language is translated to another language, it loses its real meaning. This is one example that the English does not and could not capture the original Greek language in the New Testament.

In Greek, there are several words for “love.” One word is “fileo.” This is the love of friendship. It’s a tender love but not all-encompassing kind. Another word is “agapao.” This love is more intense than the love of friendship. This is the love without reserve. It’s a total love and unconditional love. This is the kind of love Our Lord has for each of us — without reserve and total and unconditional love. This is the highest degree of love — the agape love.

So when Jesus asked Peter the question the first time, He used the word “agapao” for love. But when Peter answered Him, he did not use the same word. He used the lesser degree of love that is “fileo” which means the love of friendship. So the dialogue would be something like this: Simon, Son of John, do you love Me without reserve with total and unconditional love? And Peter would say: Yes, Lord, you know that I love you with my poor human love, tender love but not all encompassing. The second question, Jesus did the same thing; and Peter answered the same way as before. The third time, though, Jesus switched the use of the word “love”. He used what Peter used, the lesser degree of love, the love of friendship: Simon, do you love me with a poor human love, tender, but not all encompassing?

At this point, Simon understands that his poor love is enough for Jesus. It is the only one of which he is capable. Nevertheless, Simon Peter is grieved that the Lord spoke to him in this way. He replies: Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you tenderly with my poor human love but not all encompassing love that is total and unconditional.

Through pondering Our Lord’s dialogue with Peter, we realize that Jesus has put himself on the level of Peter, rather than Peter on the level of Jesus! Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict, said: “It is exactly this divine conformity that gives hope to the Disciple, who experienced the pain of infidelity. From here is born the trust that makes him able to follow Him to the

end.”

Before he used to rely solely on his own strength. Jesus prophesied to the Apostles how they will all run away because of Him. Peter, relying on his own strength and not really knowing what he’s saying, said: I will not deny you; I will die for you! Now he knows that he can’t really say that anymore because of the fact that he did deny Our Lord three times just like He said he would. He knows he’s too weak apart from the Lord. Not relying on his own strength anymore but in the Lord, he was able to follow Christ to the end. He did give up his life for the sake of Christ. He even told those who crucified him that he’s not worthy to die exactly like his Lord. So, he requested to be crucified upside down. And that’s how he was martyred. And the Lord predicted by what death he was to glorify God when He describes to him about when you’re young, you dress yourself and go wherever you want to go; but when you’re older, someone dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.

This reminds me of the current Peter’s successor, Pope Benedict XVI, our beloved Holy Father. The Lord dressed him and led him where he did not want to go. Last Friday was his 83rd birthday. And tomorrow will be his fifth anniversary of his election. Going back to five years ago, shortly after the conclave, Our Holy Father met with some 5000 Germans who came to Rome to support him at the start of his pontificate. Without violating the secrecy, he shared with them something about the conclave. He thought that his work in this life had ended and that years of tranquility awaited him. He said: “I never thought I would be elected, nor did I do anything to make it happen, but when slowly the unfolding of the votes led me to understand that the ‘guillotine’ was coming closer and looking at me, I asked God to spare me this fate.” He also said: “I prayed to the Lord that they would elect someone stronger than I, but in that prayer He obviously did not listen to me.”

I think many of us are glad the Lord did not listen to him because he’s just the right cardinal to be elected. He’s the right one to fulfill the office of Peter’s successor. He’s a great scripture scholar. He’s a great theologian. He’s a man with a strong faith and truly a friend of Christ.

Jesus gives the Twelve a share in His authority. They remain associated for ever with Christ’s kingdom. Through them and their successors, He directs the Church. Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve. Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. Christ, the ‘living stone,’ thus assures His Church, built on Peter, of victory over the powers of death. Because of the faith he confessed, Peter will remain the unshakeable rock of the Church. He’s been given the keys of the kingdom. He’s been given the power to “bind and loose.” This means that Peter and his successors has the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church. His mission will be to keep this faith from every lapse and to strengthen his brothers in it. Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, certainly has truly kept the true faith from every lapse. He truly has been strengthening us in the true faith.

In the First Reading, we heard how Peter boldly proclaimed that they must obey God rather than men. Well, 2000+ years later his successor is telling us the same thing boldly and courageously: “we must obey God rather than men.”

Conversely in modern times, he said, the freedom of the human being is often spoken of, of man's full autonomy, and thus of a liberation from obedience to God.

"This autonomy, however," the Holy Father asserted, "is a lie. It is an ontological lie because man does not exist in and for himself. It is a political and practical lie because collaboration and sharing in freedoms are necessary and if God did not exist, if God is not accessible to call upon, then only the will of the majority remains as a last recourse. The rule of the majority then becomes the final word that we must obey and this consensus — as we know from our history of the last century — can also be a consensus of evil. Thus we see that so-called autonomy does not liberate man."

Benedict XVI highlighted that dictatorships have always been against obedience to God. "Nazi dictatorship, as that of Marxism, cannot accept a God above ideological power." Today, he continued, we do not live under a dictatorship but subtle forms of dictatorship exist: "Conformity, in which it is obligatory to think as everyone else thinks, to act as all others act, and the more or less subtle aggression against the Church demonstrate how this conformity can be a real dictatorship."
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The boldness of Peter after his experience of triple denial gives us courage. As Pope Benedict XVI mentions his patron, "Peter followed the Master with the precise awareness of his own fragility; but this understanding did not discourage him. Indeed, he knew that he could count on the presence of the Risen One beside him. From the naïve enthusiasm of initial acceptance, passing through the sorrowful experience of denial and the weeping of conversion, Peter succeeded in entrusting himself to that Jesus who adapted Himself to his poor capacity of love. And in this way, he shows us the way, notwithstanding all of our weakness. We know that Jesus adapts himself to this weakness of ours."
