

Eugène Burnand, *The disciples Peter and John running to the tomb on the morning of the Resurrection.* 1898

During this Easter season we ponder the various appearances of the risen Christ to His disciples. One such appearance is at the Sea of Tiberias found in St. John's Gospel. St. John, in recounting all the details of the miraculous catch of fish, is inviting us to compare this episode of the miraculous catch of fish with that first miraculous catch that we read about in the other Gospels. When we compare these two events, especially with regard to the figure of St. Peter who is central to both accounts, we can find some things that might be helpful in considering our own relationship with the Lord in our journey of faith.

After the first miraculous catch of fish, the Gospel account tells us of St. Peter's reaction: He falls down at the Lord's feet and says: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." We would do well to ask ourselves: What would cause St. Peter to have such a reaction to this dis-

play of Divine Power that he just witnessed? Why would he respond in this way? It would seem that, by means of this miracle, St. Peter has had a personal encounter with the majesty, the power, and the holiness of God. And,

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finding himself immersed in the Divine Presence, in the light of God, he experiences an overwhelming sense of his own uncleanness, of his own sinfulness. The divine light that is enveloping him causes him to experience a deep sense of fear and shame. St. Peter's reaction is one that we can easily identify with. One is reminded of the sin of our first parents in the Garden: they are driven by a deep sense of shame and guilt to flee from the presence of God. They want to es-

cape the Divine Gaze.

And isn't this what we all experience when God's light and a sense of His holiness causes us to see our own sinfulness and wretchedness? Our natural reaction is that of flight from God. It is painful for us to have to see and acknowledge our sinful condition. We can, at times in our

lives, be overwhelmed by a sense of shame and guilt at some of the things we have done. This sense of shame can make us think and believe that we must remove ourselves from the holiness and purity of God. Many people find themselves imprisoned by a deep sense of shame in a way that makes them feel that they cannot come close to God; they have the sense that until they have done something to purify themselves and make expiation they should not come before God, but must depart from Him.

Now we can contrast this attitude of Peter in the first miraculous catch of fish with his reaction to the second catch, after the Lord has risen from the dead. When we make this comparison, it is evident that Peter has undergone a marvelous transformation of soul. Once again, by means of this miracle, Peter has experienced the majesty, the power, and the holiness of God. But this time, rather than coming before the Lord and acknowledging his sinfulness and asking the Lord to depart from him, Peter leaps into the sea and hastens to go to Jesus.

Rather than wanting to flee from the Lord, he eagerly seeks Him out and longs to come into His presence. And, of course, this is all taking place after Peter has committed the greatest and most shameful act of his life by having denied his Lord three times. Even with the full awareness of his betrayal of the Lord and his shameful weakness in denying Christ, Peter longs to be in the Lord's presence. His sense of his sinfulness and shame no longer holds him back. How can we explain this transformation that has taken place in Peter?

Peter has encountered the depth and the beauty of God's merciful love and has accepted that love. He did not, in a spirit of pride and self-sufficiency, refuse that love as Judas did. And Peter's experience of the forgiving love of Christ has attached him even *more* securely and profoundly to the heart of the Lord.

In this, St. Peter is a great model for us all. Our sense of sinfulness and the shame and guilt we can experience over the ways we fail to live up to our Christian calling should not cause us to flee from the presence of the Lord. On the contrary, it is precisely when we are experiencing our poverty and weakness and sinfulness that we should, like

St. Peter, hasten into the presence of the Lord. We should go to Him eagerly and accept in a spirit of humility and gratitude His merciful love and forgiveness. It is not to our advantage, in the face of our sinfulness and poverty, to give in to our natural tendency to want to hide from the Lord — and perhaps to hide from ourselves as well.

In the dialogue that takes place between Our Lord and St. Peter after the miraculous catch of fish, one can see that Peter has grown in genuine humility. Peter's great fault was that of self-reliance; he counted too much on his own strength. Just prior to Our Lord's passion,

Peter had boasted that even if all the others would forsake Him, he would never forsake Him. Now, when Our Lord asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Peter doesn't respond by boastfully proclaiming that his love is greater than that of the others but responds very simply: "You know that I love you."

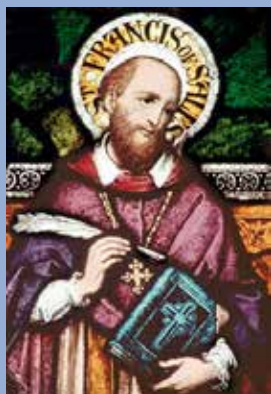
It can be helpful to reflect on the course of Peter's discipleship from Our Lord's perspective. Our Lord knew from the beginning that He was going to choose Peter as the visible head of His Church, His first Vicar here on earth. If Our Lord were to consider things in purely human, pragmatic terms, He would not have allowed the man He had chosen as the head of His Church to fail in the sight of everyone by his denial. Our Lord could very well have said: "I can't have the leader of my Church look bad; we can't afford such a great scandal at the very beginning. What kind of foundation would that be for the institution of my Church?" And so Our Lord could have arranged things differently; he could have made things a little tidier from a human perspective. But what the Lord permits also belongs to His wisdom and He knows perfectly well what kind of foundation He is laying down for His Church. He allows Peter to pass through the trial of failure and humiliation as a genuine path for him to true humility and to a knowledge of his total dependence on the Lord; to an experiential knowledge of redemption through merciful love. And, no doubt, He also permitted Peter's failure so that Christians down the ages would have a powerful model of true repentance and an example of the depths of God's mercy for all time.



When we experience failure and humiliation, we often turn to the Lord and complain: “Why did you allow me to fail? Why didn’t you help me so that I wouldn’t sin?” It may be that Our Lord is trying to teach us the same lesson He had to teach Peter. It’s a basic lesson and one that we don’t learn very easily: that we can’t save ourselves, that we are completely dependent on the Lord and that He wants to meet us, not in our virtues and good works, but precisely in our weakness and sinfulness. The lesson that it belongs to the nature of His love to want to make use even of our sinfulness and weakness in order to draw us closer to Him. When Our Lord asks Peter: “Do you love me?”, Peter could have responded by saying:

“He wants to meet us, not in our virtues and good works, but precisely in our weakness and sinfulness.”

“Lord, I do love you, but I would have loved you even more if you had spared me all that pain, humiliation and suffering.” But that is not how he responds. Peter is not bitter or resentful because of the trial he has passed through. Peter’s love for the Lord has actually grown deeper and more secure because he realizes that no one loves him more truly than the Lord. The Lord’s love for Peter is so strong and true that He would not leave Peter with all his illusions and pride. May the trials of our lives and whatever failures and humiliations that we suffer also bring us, as they did St. Peter, into a deeper, truer, and humbler love for Our Lord.



Love of God in Action

As human beings we are blessed with the power of reason and can choose our actions, goals and motives. We can even order the motives of our actions. Hence, a man who gives alms may do so for a variety of reasons: To win a poor man’s friendship, to edify others or to please God. Now, many times we find ourselves with mixed motives. How can we make love of God the first motive of all that we think, say, or do?

St. Francis de Sales, in his spiritual classic, *A Treatise on the Love of God*, responds, “If a man is valiant, obedient, patriotic and magnanimous in order to please God, then he shows more love for God than courage, obedience, patriotism or magnanimity. Such a man’s will has come to be utterly absorbed in the love of God, using all other motives solely as a

means to achieve this goal. If we go to Lyons in order to reach Paris, then Paris, not Lyons, is our goal; if we happen to sing only to serve God, then the service of God, not singing, is the end in view.”

He also writes that we can clothe all our motives with the love of God (that is, Charity) by willfully and conscientiously praying to God to let love for Him be the main purpose of our actions.

In this way, we can unify our mixed motives under the banner of love of God in every situation. Not only do we give God pleasure by using all the opportunities we’re presented with to make acts of love for Him, but we also receive the merit of repeated acts of charity and grow in our love of God.

So, next time you suffer a headache, have your patience tried, or do anything in the course of the day, ask yourself why you do what you do and then clothe your motives with love for God by a fervent prayer, asking Him to make that your first and foremost motive.

Note: Our next issue will be in September. Thank you for all your support and prayers!