

St. Peter: A Model for Growth in the Spiritual Life

Of the many figures that we meet in the Old and New Testaments, there are few who are as intriguing and attractive as that of St. Peter. There is much in the example of St. Peter that is useful for our own instruction. With this in mind I would like to offer a little reflection on certain aspects of the character of Peter beginning with the episode that we read about in chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel. It is there that we hear St. Peter make his great profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And then Our Lord Himself tells us that this truth which St. Peter has professed was not revealed to Peter by flesh and blood but by the Father in heaven. So we are told that St. Peter's mind had been given a divine, supernatural enlightenment. He has made a profession of supernatural faith – an act which exceeds the capacity of our natural powers and which can only be made with the help of God's grace.

With this in mind, it is all the more striking to see what comes next as we continue to read the 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew relates to us that it was immediately after this incident at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus began to show his disciples that He must go up to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and the scribes. And then Peter takes Jesus aside and remonstrates with Him and tells Him that these things should never happen to Him, and this word of Peter earns a sharp rebuke from Our Lord.

And so it is interesting to reflect that although God had revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior of Israel, clearly He did not give to Peter a fullness of light about the whole matter; He didn't enlighten Peter's mind so as to

have some understanding as to how the Messiah was going to redeem Israel, and what the nature of Christ's kingship would be and what form the coming kingdom would take. God leads Peter bit by bit, one step at a time. And so Peter, like many of the Jews of his time, had false expectations and a false understanding of the Messiah and how He was going to accomplish His mission. And we see this not only in this instance, but in all the years of Our Lord's public ministry, St. Peter harbored false expectations about the



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– Peter Paul Rubens 1612

Messiah and false expectations about the nature of the Kingdom that the Messiah was coming to inaugurate. And I think he also had many false expectations about himself and his own role in this new Messianic Kingdom. St. Peter expects a Messiah who will use His power to transform the world, a Messiah who will intervene directly into the affairs of Israel and the nations and in some dramatic fashion rectify the evil and injustice in the world. In all likelihood Peter, having been made the prince of the Apostles, imagines that he will be God's right hand man in this work and that he will accompany the Messiah as He gloriously triumphs over His enemies.

And when we look at the life of St. Peter we see that God, in His love and goodness, and in His own way, does not leave Peter with these false and all too human misconceptions about God and His kingdom; rather God purifies Peter and transforms Peter in the crucible of humiliation and suffering. Our Lord turns all the expectations of Peter on their head by showing Peter that the path to the kingdom is not one of power and coercion but one of humility and service and suffering.

And, as is often the case in Scripture, this example of the development of Peter's life serves as a kind of paradigm for Christian souls down the ages. We see the same kind of inner dynamic at work again and again in the hearts of Christians. We see this happen very frequently with generous, young souls who are genuinely called by God to serve the Church in the priesthood or religious life or as dedicated laymen. We see these generous souls come to the Church with all the energy and enthusiasm and idealism of a St. Peter and, as so frequently happens, it's usually not too long before they begin to encounter what could be called the "humanness" of the Church; they begin to see how much weakness and imperfection and infidelity there is in the Church and this often constitutes a kind of trial of faith – just as Peter's faith was tried as he came to see that the Messiah chose to be a human Messiah, that is, one who was vulnerable and open to abuse and suffering at the hands of other men. These generous souls thought that things would be different: there isn't supposed to be any injustice and corruption in the Church; priests and bishops especially aren't supposed to be so weak and cowardly that they fear to preach the fullness of the faith, and above all, they should not use their position and authority to commit and cover up sins and crimes. Things just aren't supposed to be like this. God should not permit these disorders and scandals and infidelities; He should intervene and rectify the situation. And so, once again, just as in the case of Peter, in confronting these circumstances, we can experience the desire and the hope that God will bring about His kingdom by the use

of force and coercion, rather than by the cross of Christ. You will find those in the Church who like St. Peter in the garden want to use their swords to address the issue of the unjust suffering that is inflicted on the Church from both without and from within. This is not to say that we should in any way deny or fail to acknowledge the guilt of those who have done wrong and take appropriate measures, only that we also need to learn to accept the sufferings of Christ's Body the Church as something that also belongs to God's providence and which are part of the larger sharing in the redemptive sufferings of Christ.

But perhaps the most painful disappointment of all that our generous, young soul will come to suffer is when he comes to realize that *he isn't what he is supposed to be*; that he also suffers from the same weaknesses and temptations and trials that others suffer from, or in other words, when he comes to see that he too is in need of Christ's redemption.

It seems to me that there is a very common temptation at this point in the spiritual life – the temptation to keep our minds and hearts so occupied and focused on the disorders and faults and infidelities of others that we distract ourselves from the painful duty of looking within and coming face to face with our own deep need for God's grace and redemption. It must have been extremely difficult for St. Peter, knowing that he was singled out by Christ to lead His Church, to have had to face his own weakness and his denial of Christ. But at the same time it was God's chosen way to purify his soul and to leave him as an example for the rest of us.

To understand growth in the spiritual life as principally a passage through trials is a view of the spiritual life that corresponds very well with what we are presented with not only in the case of St. Peter but in the rest of Sacred Scripture as well. When we reflect on the great men and women of Scripture – Abraham and Moses, David and St. Joseph and the Blessed Mother and the Apostles – we see that they all grew closer to God by passing through trials of one sort or another. They didn't always do

well with the trials that they were confronted with, sometimes they failed, but the failure was not the end. When accepted, the failure itself forms part of the journey. I mention this because when it comes to how we should think about and gauge growth in the spiritual life many modern books of spirituality tend to look to certain interior states, whether it be states of prayer or to certain psychological states, as

ways of gauging growth in the spiritual life. Without denying that these may have their place, it seems to me that it may not be as helpful as to think of the spiritual life as a series of trials through which one must pass and that it is especially by means of these trials we advance. This is what we see clearly in the case of St. Peter. ✠