



His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
St Luke Parish
9 am Mass, September 3

Sermon:

“Peter and Francis”

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Simon, “The Rock,” Peter, is the most interesting, unpredictable, and challenging of all of Jesus’ apostles. His current successor as Bishop of Rome, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the former archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Pope Francis 1st, is equally interesting, unpredictable, and challenging. St. Peter and the Pope have the common tendency to do and say things that are completely unexpected.

Peter has been the lead actor in the continuous readings from the gospel of Matthew that we have been reflecting on in recent weeks. We heard him doubting that Jesus was walking on the waters of the stormy sea. Peter turns his gaze from the face of Jesus to the turbulent blue-black waves and begins to sink, screaming, “Lord, save me!”

Last Sunday, a very different Peter boldly answers Jesus’ question, “Who do you say the Son of Man is?” With a confession of absolute faith he answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”

Jesus then addresses Simon as *petrus*, or “rock.” “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” This is the first time the word “church” appears in the gospels. This verse is critical for several reasons.

First, Jesus trusts Peter’s unsteady faith enough to make him the leader of the apostles. (Remember, after Jesus is arrested, Peter will deny that he even knows Him). Second, those of you who have been to Rome, know that these words, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church,” are inscribed in Michaelangelo’s massive dome of the Papal Basilica of St. Peter, which covers the traditional site of Peter’s burial. Third, as Catholics, we believe this Petrine authority continues in the ministry of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, and Successor of St. Peter.

Today, as we continue to hear from Matthew 16, we meet a very different Peter. After Jesus explains to His disciples that He “must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and that He must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.” (Matthew 16: 21) He is revealing the climax of His earthly ministry: death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. But Peter refuses to believe Jesus’ words, exclaiming, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to You!” (Matthew 16: 22)

Peter and the other disciples were not thinking of Jesus as a suffering servant, but as a powerful descendant of King David, who would be an earthly savior to free the Jewish people from the tyranny of the Roman empire. Amazingly, Jesus, looking at, or perhaps “through” Peter, declares, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as men do.” (Matthew 16: 23)

Peter falls silent as Jesus explains to His followers and to all of us the great cost of discipleship. “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Peter painfully learned the truth of these words, when, as leader of the Christian community in Rome, he, like Jesus, was put to death by crucifixion in 64 AD.

In 2013, the conclave unexpectedly elected Cardinal Bergoglio, 76, as the first Jesuit Pope, a surprise to the world and clearly a heavy cross to the new Roman Pontiff. Like Peter, Pope Francis has spent the ten years of his Pontificate doing interesting, unpredictable, and challenging things. He urged Catholics to think of the Church less as an institution and more as a “field hospital,” committed to nursing the wounds of homeless migrants, seeking to address world hunger, and climate change, embracing with compassion those who are divorced and remarried, and asking, “who am I to judge?” when asked about people in same sex relationships, while also proclaiming the Church’s clear teachings on euthanasia, abortion, and the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman.

The Pope knows well that he is admired and respected by many Catholics in the United States. At the same time, he recently expressed his dismay at “a very strong, organized, reactionary attitude,” of some Catholics in this country who are unhappy with the new direction he is giving to the Church. He wonders if some American Catholics are fixated on moral issues like abortion and human sexuality, while ignoring other moral issues like caring for the poor and the environment. He wrote, “Our defense of the innocent unborn needs to be clear, firm, and passionate. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned.”

Francis stresses that Holy Communion “is not the reward of saints, but the bread of sinners.” He believes, “The vision of the doctrine of the church as an unchanging fortress is wrong. He stresses that the Church is a living, dynamic community of faith.”

Recently, Pope Francis was asked about the degree to which more traditional Catholics in the United States disagree with his approach to teaching the Catholic faith. Is there a danger that more traditional Catholics will break with the Church? Francis said, “I have great love and respect for the Church in the United States. I hope and pray that American Catholics will always work for the unity of the Church.” St. Peter’s ministry, as the rock of the Church, was a heavy cross for him. So, too, is Pope Francis’ ministry as Successor of Peter a heavy cross for him, as he strives to lead and guide the whole Church in a manner very different from his predecessors, Benedict XVI and Saint John Paul II.

The crosses that you and I bear each day, as we strive to live as authentic Christians, are very different from the crosses carried by St. Peter and by Pope Francis, but they are very real. Why would Jesus ask us to deny ourselves? Does being a disciple of Christ require us to lose our personal identities? On the contrary, when we put on Christ, our personal identities are made more complete.

Jesus' calls for us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him seem contrary to the values of American culture. Jesus' call raises real problems in a culture that implies that we should be able to do whatever we want to do, think whatever we want to think, and believe whatever we want to believe.

Christianity should never be uncomfortable or inconvenient. We should not have to deny ourselves anything. Being a Christian should be easy, comfortable, and lead to prosperity. There are certainly Christian ministries that preach this prosperity gospel. But Jesus asks, "what does it profit you if you gain the whole world but suffer the loss of your soul?" What is the point of gaining everything there is in this world only to lose everything for eternity?

Just as Peter and the Pope answer Jesus' questions in their life journeys, each of us must answer them in our lives each day! Only if our answers are true to the gospel, will the Son of Man come with His angels in His Father's glory and bless each of us, according to our willingness to take up our cross and follow Him!

Praise be Jesus Christ, both now and forever. Amen!