

**I HAVE PRAYED
THAT YOUR OWN FAITH MAY NOT FAIL!**

Luke 22:32

Pastoral Letter 2013

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Year of Faith

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(Luke 22:32)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you!

From Benedict XVI to Francis

1. On February 11, 2013 Pope Benedict XVI surprised the Church and the whole world with the announcement that he would step down from his ministry as successor of Saint Peter and Bishop of Rome on February 28, 2013, at 8pm local time. In the meantime we have seen Benedict XVI taking leave of the Apostolic Palace and becoming “Pope Emeritus” and we have been witnesses of the Conclave of the Cardinals. They elected on March 13, 2013 Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires (Argentina) as the new Pope, who chose the name Francis. From the Loggia of Saint Peter’s Basilica he greeted and blessed for the first time the crowd waiting in the square and the faithful throughout the world.

2. I take this opportunity first of all to thank the former Pope Benedict XVI for his ministry as “a humble worker in the Lord’s vineyard” and as a powerful teacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I shall never forget the wonderful moments in private audiences when I experienced the patiently-listening Pope, taking note of the important points in writing, and speaking as a pastor who had carefully studied the situation in our region beforehand in order to be able to ask the right questions. He really did what Jesus had asked Simon Peter to do: “You must strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:32). He will continue to pray for all of us and we shall gratefully remember him in our prayers. - On behalf of all the faithful of my Vicariate I greet the new Pope Francis and promise him due obedience as the head of the College of all the bishops. His simplicity, humility, and closeness to the poor are well known in his home country. As the pastor of the whole Church he will continue to give us his example.

I have prayed that your own faith may not fail

3. The change on the Apostolic See of Rome during this “Year of Faith” is a good and appropriate occasion to share with you a meditation which relates to

the ministry of Peter as the one who strengthens us in faith. On the evening of the Last Supper, according to Luke's gospel, Jesus addresses Simon Peter: "I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22:32). These beautiful words of Jesus show us clearly although discretely where the Petrine ministry – and I dare to say the ministry of each bishop – is rooted. There is first the action of the Lord who prays that the disciple's faith may not fail. Jesus on the other hand is realist enough to remind Simon that he is human and can go astray. Despite the prophetic word which relates to the threefold denial of Peter and to many other of his weaknesses the Lord entrusts him with the task to be the pastor of the others: "Once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers." None of us, neither the Pope nor any other bishop, neither a priest nor any faithful is free from human weakness. We all need the prayer of the Lord and to turn back to him. Only then can we become guardians of our brothers and sisters. The Gospels are full of explicit texts and hints regarding the human limits of Simon Peter, but also of his unique quality as the one whom Jesus called to be the rock on which he would build his Church. Let us therefore "test" our own faith, in taking Saint Peter as our example.

4. In the Gospel according to Matthew Jesus asks the disciples - and beyond the disciples all of us: "Your faith is so small! Why are you so afraid?" (Mt 8:26). In the same Gospel we find a similar question addressed to Peter alone: "Your faith is so small! ... Why did you doubt me?" (Mt 14:31) In chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel the fear and doubt - the little faith - of the disciples and of Simon Peter seem to have vanished. Instead we hear a beautiful and courageous profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus attests to the faith of Peter, saying that "not flesh and blood" had revealed to him such a mystery, but only the "Father in heaven" (Mt 16:16.17). Then Jesus adds those words, which we can understand only in the light of this profession of faith: "You are Peter and on this rock I shall build my church and the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 16:18-19). In the Catholic Church we understand and believe that this promise of Christ is not limited to Simon Peter but continues in those who succeed him in the task as the head of the College of the Bishops.

Trial and error

5. However, in spite of this extraordinary gift conferred to Simon, we cannot find in the Gospel even a hint of triumphal reverence regarding Peter. On the contrary, all four Gospels maintain a great sobriety and honesty, openness, and truthfulness regarding Simon Peter. The Gospel writer lets us see that Jesus confers the leadership of the Church upon a man who humanly-speaking is not qualified for such ministry: neither before nor after his investiture. The same chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel is a reminder. Just a few verses before Peter's

wonderful profession of faith, Jesus is rather disappointed with the disciples worrying about a practical food-problem. He asks them: “Why, men of little faith, are you saying that there is no bread?” (16,8) And the Lord criticizes them: “Why do you not understand...?” (16,11) He reminds them that in more than one situation of lack of food they and the other people had enough to eat because of his presence and action in multiplying the bread and the fish.

6. Immediately after the profession of Peter, Jesus announces that he must suffer death on the cross. Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to hinder the Lord. The task given by Jesus to lead the Church does not spare Peter from being a “man of little faith”, even worse, from opposing the plans of God. We cannot find anywhere in the Gospels a harsher word, neither to the Pharisees nor to the scribes, than the answer Jesus gives to Peter at this moment: “Away from me, Satan! You are for me a scandal, because you do not have God’s thought, but human thoughts” (Mt 16:23).

7. Through weakness and error Peter had to learn the real meaning of “following Jesus”. Neither his faith nor his personal qualities were perfect at the moment when he was charged with the pastoral care of the Church. To be aware of this fact is very important and we should never forget this point when we are looking at those who are called to a special service in the Church: the Pope, the bishops, the priests, the deacons. The same is true for every member of the faithful. A theologian expressed it once in the following way: “Of course, Peter would not be Peter, if he had not given himself entirely to his Lord Jesus, following the Christ and finally offering his own life. However, Peter became a real blessing throughout the centuries, because we can learn a lot from his failures before and after the death and resurrection of Christ. Millions of faithful, in spite of their imperfections, have learned from Peter how to live in joy and consolation with God” (Eduard Schweizer). Could it not be that Simon Peter was given the task to strengthen his brothers, not first of all because of his virtues, but because of his own experience of being a shaky rock which could become the solid ground only in virtue of the solid Rock, Jesus, who prayed for him and continues to do so from heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father?

Faith is not only a feeling but has content

8. However, there is something else to keep in mind: Faith is not only a question of trust and confidence in the Lord. It has equally to do with welcoming and accepting the truth God has revealed us in Jesus Christ. Thus the profession of Peter in Matthew 16 is not only the expression of his full confidence in the Lord, but the assent to the divine mystery of Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). We find here already in a short form what will be developed in the faithful reflection of the early Church

and lead to what we still profess in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father...” The “Word made flesh” in John’s Gospel is true man and true God. It is Peter as the head of the College of the Apostles and later the Bishop of Rome as the head of the College of the bishops to lead in this profession of faith and to confirm us in it whenever we tend to shift away from that faith.

9. We find this situation in the 6th chapter of John’s Gospel when Jesus towards the end of the great Eucharistic speech in the synagogue of Capernaum asks the still remaining disciples (others had already abandoned him): “Do you also want to leave?” In this situation Simon Peter answered for all: “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69). This is not only the expression of a deep trust and confidence but also the profession of a faith content which is and will remain essential for the Church until the end of time. The words of Jesus to Peter in Luke “but you, when you have returned, strengthen your brothers” means therefore also to lead us in the right, the true faith in Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of truth as Advocate

10. The Lord, who is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6), knew well that his truth could survive in the hearts of the disciples and of those who believed after them only with the help of an “advocate”: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16-17). It is this Spirit of truth of whom Jesus says that “the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it” (v. 17). We should not therefore be surprised that Jesus, who is the truth and sends us the Spirit of truth, is opposed in the world. Only the one who opens his heart can accept and understand the truth of Jesus. This is possible because of the gift the Father is sending us in his name: “The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name – he will teach you everything and remind you of all I taught you” (Jn 14:26). The Church and her faithful could not really keep the word of Jesus, if she had to rely only on the memory of human beings and some writings. She had to be given a living memory, the Holy Spirit who keeps reminding the Church in order to conserve everything Jesus taught his disciples. He alone is the one who makes the sacraments meaningful and effective. Simon Peter, on whom Jesus built his Church, has, together with the other Apostles, the gift of witnessing to the true faith and to keep close to the Lord those who believe in him. The risen Lord demands of him three times: “Feed my lambs – Tend my sheep – Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:16-17). The task of Simon Peter obviously is not simply a task of “psychological encouragement” but has to do with real “stuff”, i.e. with the food

of Christ and true belief in him. Never in the Holy Scripture will you find an expression similar to “I feel Jesus in my heart”, but you will very often find the sober expression “I believe”, or “he believed in him”. In fact the Gospel of John has at the end of chapter 20 the following conclusion: “These (signs) are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

Faith informed by charity

11. Dear brothers and sisters, none of the Apostles was a perfect man right from the beginning, but they were called and fascinated by Christ. In spite of their weaknesses and limits they followed Christ because they believed in him and put all their trust into the mercy and grace of God. The question the Lord asked Simon Peter is addressed also to you and to me: “Do you love me?” This question requires from you and from me a personal reply that I cannot delegate to anybody else. In the other Gospels Peter and the other disciples had been asked: “Who do you think I am?” Now at the end of John’s Gospel the question becomes very personal: “Do you love me more than the others?” We are grateful that Peter (and after him his successors until these days) answered humbly: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (Jn 21,17). It is our task to give in our personal life situation the same reply: “Lord, you know everything (my failures, my denials, my shortcomings); but you know that I love you!” Should this not be the fruit of the “Year of Faith”?

12. How can we show this “faith informed by charity”? Saint James gives us in his letter a very clear and practical teaching in this regard: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Indeed someone might say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works” (James 2:14-18). Faith has therefore to become visible not simply in liturgical celebrations and exercises of devotion, but in deeds of charity and love. That is why the Church from the beginning recognized the deep inner connection between *leiturgia* (liturgy) and *diakonia* (ministry of charity).

Taming the tongue

13. Then James states that “faith without works is dead” (2:26) and continues with the very practical advice of “taming the tongue”. “With it – he says – we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessings and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so” (James 3:9-10). Should it not be the first step

of our daily faith practice to “tame our tongue” when we speak to one another? Our many words spoken in the church should in no way be invalidated by the words spoken outside. The reciting of the Creed, praying the holy Rosary, holding Novenas, all must find their correspondence in the daily language of respect and evangelical love towards others.

Respecting the priorities in faith

14. Some faithful may need to have a look into the priorities in their faith practice and understanding. I take an example: Quite often I notice men and women entering one of our churches running directly to the corner of the saints to say their prayers and to touch and kiss the statues or pictures while they do not even bow or genuflect before the blessed sacrament in the tabernacle. Nothing against the devotion of saints! However, we should never forget that they are given to us as examples how to love and to adore the Lord. I do not think that any saint in heaven will be happy to see that he or she is overwhelmed with devotion while the Lord himself is not even paid attention.

Avoiding superstition

15. Other faithful are not always holding off from questionable religious practices which have more to do with superstition than with faith in Jesus Christ. People who run quickly as soon as they hear of apparitions and miracles should first have a look into the Bible, where Jesus says to such people: “an evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights” (Mt 12:39-40). That means: The true sign and miracle we have to rely on is given in the death and resurrection of our Lord. It continues to be sacramentally present each time when we celebrate the holy Eucharist.

Centrality of the Eucharist

16. Dear friends in Christ, each time after the consecration in the holy Mass the celebrant proclaims the “mystery of faith” inviting thus all faithful to acclaim the death and resurrection of Christ until he comes again. Wherever and whenever the Eucharist is celebrated in communion with the bishop and with the Pope we obey the Lord’s command: “Do this in memory of me!” “Memory” does not simply mean “Do not forget me!” In the Eucharistic memory is kept really present the death and resurrection of our Lord. The sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is thus present and effective among us as it happened two thousand years ago in Jerusalem. The first witnesses did not get more than us nor do we get less than them, because Jesus Christ is as really present as he was during the Last Supper and the gifts of bread and wine are still his life-giving body and blood. The “Year of Faith” is an excellent occasion to deepen our faith in the

one who shocked the disciples with his Eucharistic speech in Capernaum. He is still asking the same question: “Do you also want to leave?” Let us without hesitation answer with Simon Peter: “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69).

May the Lord bless you and keep you faithful to him who has “the words of eternal life”.

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