

Dear Brothers and Sisters, ... Today's Feast offers me the opportunity to meditate once again on Peter's confession, the decisive moment in the journey of the disciples with Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels have it take place in the district of Caesarea Philippi (cf. Mt 16:13-20; Mk 8:27-30; Lk 9:18-22). John, for his part, keeps for us another important confession by Peter, after the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and Jesus' Address in the Synagogue of Capernaum (cf. Jn 6:66-70). Matthew, in the text just proclaimed, recalls Jesus' attribution of the nickname Cephias, "Rock", to Simon. Jesus said that he desired to build his Church "on this rock" and with this in view, conferred on Peter the power of the keys (cf. Mt 16:17-19). It clearly emerges from these accounts that Peter's confession is inseparable from his pastoral duty to Christ's flock which was entrusted to him.

According to all the Evangelists, Simon's confession takes place at a crucial moment in Jesus' life when, after preaching in Galilee, he resolutely set out for Jerusalem in order to bring his saving mission to completion with his death on the Cross and his Resurrection. The disciples were involved in this decision: Jesus invited them to make a choice that would bring them to distinguish themselves from the crowd so as to become the community of those who believed in him, his "family", the beginning of the Church.

In fact, there are two ways of "seeing" and "knowing" Jesus: one - that of the crowd - is more superficial; the other - that of the disciples - more penetrating and genuine. With his twofold question: "What do the people say?" and "who do you say that I am?", Jesus invited the disciples to become aware of this different perspective. The people thought that Jesus was a prophet. This was not wrong, but it does not suffice; it is inadequate. In fact, it was a matter of delving deep, of recognizing the uniqueness of the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his newness.

This is how it still is today: many people draw near to Jesus, as it were, from the outside. Great scholars recognize his spiritual and moral stature and his influence on human history, comparing him to Buddha, Confucius, Socrates and other wise and important historical figures. Yet they do not manage to recognize him in his uniqueness. What Jesus said to Philip at the Last Supper springs to mind: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?" (Jn 14:9).

Jesus is often also considered as one of the great founders of a religion from which everyone may take something in order to form his or her own conviction. Today too, "people" have different opinions about Jesus, just as they did then. And as he did then, Jesus also repeats his question to us, his disciples today: "And who do you say that I am?". Let us make Peter's answer our own. According to the Gospel of Mark he said: "You are the Christ" (8:29); in Luke, the affirmation is: "The Christ of God" (Lk 9:20); in Matthew resounds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16); finally, in John: "You are the Holy One of God". These are all correct answers which are also right for us.

Let us reflect on Matthew's text in particular, quoted by today's liturgy... In fact, the responsibility conferred on Peter by the Lord was rooted in the personal relationship which the Jesus of history had with Simon the fisherman, from his first meeting with him when he said to him "So you are Simon... You shall be called Cephias" (which means Peter)" (Jn 1:42). The Evangelist John emphasizes it, he who was also a fisherman and an associate, together with his brother James, of the two brothers, Simon and Andrew. Jesus... after his baptism in the Jordan approached the four brother fishermen who were then disciples of the Baptist (cf. Jn 1:35-42). He sought them out on the shores of Lake Galilee and called them to follow him, to become

"fishers of men" (cf. Mk 1:16-20). He then entrusted Peter with a specific task, thereby recognizing in him a special gift of faith from the heavenly Father. ... (we) cannot diminish the importance of Simon's historical journey with his Master and Lord, who from the outset attributed to him the characteristic of the "rock" on which he intended to build his new community, the Church.

In the Synoptic Gospels Peter's confession is always followed by Jesus' announcement of his imminent Passion. Peter reacted to this announcement because he was not yet able to understand. Nonetheless, this was a fundamental element on which Jesus strongly insisted. Indeed, the titles attributed to him by Peter - you are "the Christ", "the Christ of God", "the Son of the living God" - can only be properly understood in light of the mystery of his death and Resurrection.

And the opposite is also true: the event of the Cross reveals its full meaning only if "this man" who suffered and died on the Cross "truly was the Son of God", to use the words uttered by the centurion as he stood before the Crucified Christ (cf. Mk 15:39). These texts clearly say that the integrity of the Christian faith stems from the confession of Peter, illumined by the teaching of Jesus on his "way" toward glory, that is, on his absolutely unique way, being the Messiah and the Son of God.

It was a narrow "way", a shocking "manner" for the disciples of every age, who are inevitably led to think according to men rather than according to God (cf. Mt 16:23). Today too, as in Jesus' day, it does not suffice to possess the proper confession of faith: it is always necessary to learn anew from the Lord the actual way in which he is Savior and the path on which we must follow him. Indeed, we have to recognize that even for believers, the Cross is always hard to accept.

Instinct impels one to avoid it and the tempter leads one to believe that it is wiser to be concerned with saving oneself rather than losing one's life through faithfulness to love, faithfulness to the Son of God made man. Who do you say I am? What was it that the people to whom Jesus was speaking found hard to accept? What continues to be hard for many people also in our time? It is difficult to accept that he claimed not only to be one of the prophets but the Son of God, and that he claimed God's own authority for himself. Listening to him preaching, seeing him heal the sick, evangelize the lowly and the poor and reconcile sinners, little by little the disciples came to realize that he was the Messiah in the most exalted sense of the word, that is, not only a man sent by God, but God himself made man. Clearly, all this was far beyond them, it exceeded their capacity for understanding. They were able to express their faith with the titles of the Judaic tradition: "Christ", "Son of God", "Lord". However, to adhere truly to reality, these titles had in some way to be rediscovered in their most profound truth: Jesus himself revealed their true meaning with his life, ever surprising, even paradoxical considering the customary concepts.

And the faith of the disciples itself had to progressively adapt. It presents itself as a pilgrimage which begins in the experience of the historical Jesus, finds its foundation in the Paschal Mystery, but must then advance further thanks to the working of the Holy Spirit. This was also the faith of the Church in the course of history; this is also our faith as Christians of today. Firmly resting on the "rock" of Peter, it is a pilgrimage toward the fullness of that truth which the Fisherman of Galilee professed with passionate conviction: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Mt 16:16).

In Peter's profession of faith, dear brothers and sisters, we can feel that we are all one, despite the divisions that have wounded the Church's unity down the centuries and whose consequences are still being felt. Today, in the name of Sts Peter and Paul, let us renew, our commitment to accept to the very end the desire of Christ, who wants us to be fully united...

*From the homily of Pope Benedict XIV,
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