

THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER

Built on Simon's confession of faith

Homily for the Chapter members in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians

1Pt 5:1-4, Mt 16:13-19

Dear confreres,

I am very pleased to preside over this first Eucharist at the commencement of the General Chapter here in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians which is an expression of gratitude of our beloved father, Don Bosco, to Our Lady for her loving presence in his life and mission. She was always the mother and teacher he received in his 'dream' at the age of nine and who accompanied and supported him in the foundation and development of his work.

The liturgy today sets before us the feast of the Chair of St. Peter. It offers us a wonderful opportunity for a vivid and stimulating remembrance of the first among the apostles, Simon Peter, and a reaffirmation of our "sensus Ecclesiae" and filial devotion to the Pope today, Pope Francis.

A native of Capernaum and a fisherman by profession, Simon met Jesus of Nazareth while he was busily engaged in his fishing: he left everything - his home and his family - in order to follow the Master forever. His personality, at once so simple and attractive, emerges spontaneously in the entire Gospel story. Apart from his merits, Jesus chose him together with the Twelve, and selected him to be the first among them. Today's celebration around the symbol of the Chair highlights the *mission of teacher and shepherd* that Christ conferred on Peter: it was on him and on his confession of faith, as on a rock, that Christ founded his Church.

What the Apostle says of himself is admirable. In the first reading he presents himself as an "elder", "a witness to the sufferings of Christ," and a "sharer in the glory that is to be revealed"; in this self-presentation we can grasp the full identity of the disciple and apostle, Peter. He lived as a disciple, sharing the fate of his Master, and never losing hope. Equally important are the recommendations he chooses to make in his address to the elders, reminding them of the honour and the burden of responsibility that Jesus has placed on his shoulders. He then strongly urges them to *feed, watch over and be examples* to the flock - a sign that the apostle is not transmitting something of his own, but a mission that has been entrusted to him to be shared and apportioned to others.

It is not self-interest but a love for others that must inspire and sustain the 'elders', viz. those in the Church who are called to exercise a ministry of authority and leadership. Apostolic spirituality calls for total service, full dedication and unconditional loyalty to the very end. The last words of this reading contain a promise: those who remain faithful are assured a "crown of glory," and it will be the chief shepherd who will bestow it on the pastors of the Church. Peter's Magisterium, his Chair, consists not so much in words as in the witness of a life spent in following Christ and taking care of the flock. All of this is an example for us!

The gospel has just reminded us of one of the most important moments of the entire public ministry of Jesus. After a period of living with the disciples who accompanied him while he preached the Kingdom of God, Jesus steps aside. Away from whatever may cause distraction, he is interested in knowing what people say about him and what the disciples

themselves think. It is not mere curiosity that provokes him to ask such a question; his intention is to oblige his disciples to take a stand with him and publicly proclaim who he is for them and what they expect to gain from following him.

Anyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus always ends up feeling obliged to define himself by defining who Jesus is for him: it is not enough for him to follow Jesus closely; he must really know and proclaim Jesus without any complexes. The disciple of Jesus must become his witness; the apostle of Christ must be his herald. Even today Jesus continues to ask us what people think about Him and what He is for us.

To proclaim Jesus does not simply mean stating the opinion we have formed about Him, and not even declaring the faith we have received from our parents and from the Church. By accepting Him as the Christ and the Son of God, Peter did not proclaim his thoughts about Jesus or express his personal views, but declared what God had put in his heart. To believe in Jesus Christ, therefore, requires us to make God's standpoint our own, to see Jesus as God sees him, to feel towards him what God feels, to contemplate him in the light of God and to love Him as God wants. It is not correct to imagine Jesus according to our desires and our needs; such an image would not reflect the authentic Jesus, the true Son of God. A Jesus moulded to our tastes would not do God justice: Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God, is always far better than what we could wish for, but to experience Him, we must accept Him as he really is, viz. in the way God has given Him to us.

Only those disciples who, like Peter at Caesarea, see Jesus through God's eyes and proclaim Him in the way God has revealed Him to them, will be called to be the rock and foundation of faith for others. Jesus today needs believers who, like Peter, proclaim Him as the Messiah and the Son of God; He will declare them blessed and entrust to them the mission of being the rock and foundation of the faith of others – in our specific case, of the young. In the Church, authority, together with the ability to teach and the duty to protect, is based on personal faith.

I conclude with a quote from St. Augustine: "In Peter we perceive the chosen rock... In Peter we recognize the Church. In fact, Christ built his Church not on a man but on Peter's confession. What was Peter's confession? '*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*' (Mt 16:16). This is the rock, the foundation; this is where He built the Church to withstand the gates of hell (cf. Mt 16:18)."¹

Let us feel impelled today in the depths of our hearts to tell Jesus what he means to us. Blessed is the one among us who confesses him, making Peter's words his own! Because then we too will be entrusted with his "mission", viz. that of being the foundation and support of the faith and loyalty of others.

Let us pray to Mary. May she take us by the hand as she did with Johnny Bosco and may she continue to guide us in embracing with joy and fidelity the mission God has entrusted to us as a Congregation, viz. to communicate to young people the beauty of the faith, to announce to them the joy of the Gospel, to "feed the flock of God that has been entrusted to us" in the Church.

Fr Pascual Chávez V., SDB
Valdocco: February 22, 2014

¹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Sermoni per i tempi liturgici*, Milan 1994, 371f.