

The Call of Peter

Like the discovery of details in a Sherlock Holmes mystery, the purpose of this series of eight articles on St. Peter is to put together the pieces of his life and discover precisely who he was. More importantly, it is to discover the nature of the unique mission given him by Jesus Christ, a mission we believe continues today in the ministry of the Holy Father, who will soon be visiting us in the United States. In this way, we will have a fuller picture of the mission and ministry of the pope in our day for we believe that the pope and the bishops are successors of Peter and the apostles, and when they speak on matters of faith and morals, they exercise the authoritative voice of Jesus Christ Himself. (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 336-7)

Many aspects of Peter's life will be covered in this series. Jesus called Peter the "rock" upon whom the Church was to be built. From the beginning, Peter was considered first among the apostles. He was given the power of the keys. He denied Christ three times and thereafter repented. Importantly, he was a witness to the risen Christ.

This article treats the "call" of Peter by Jesus. (*Matthew* 4:18-22) Each of us delights in receiving a "call," especially if it involves a job opportunity. Most of us apply for jobs, receive interviews, provide a curriculum vitae and have some clear idea of what we seek. For Peter, that was different. He was a fisherman. Scripture tells us that, walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw him and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea as was their custom as fishermen. The "call" was simply: "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." We are told that they left their nets at once and followed Jesus. There were no interviews. Jesus took the initiative. They asked no questions, nor was there a delay. They simply followed someone who offered them a new kind of job, and they did not even know the details of the job.

In this search for details about Peter and the papacy, one interesting question is, why did Jesus call a fisherman to be a follower, and not just a follower, but soon to be the "first" among His followers? After all, his father was a woodworker. He knew that trade firsthand. Tax collectors were also known to him, and soon one would be called to join their group of privileged followers. What was it about the life and work

of a simple fisherman that Jesus is revealing to us in the choice of Peter as first of His followers?

The work and ministry of Peter, and those who have succeeded him in the line of popes, reveal in many subtle ways the life and work of a fisherman. Those qualities seem to be inherent in the unique ministry of Peter and his successors. Jesus knew what he had in mind when he told Peter that he would make him a fisher of men.

Not unlike the busy lives of Peter's recent successors, we can see the fisherman Peter working very hard. The job requires strength, especially an inner strength, and it is not for the faint of heart. Fishermen face many challenges, with nets always to be mended. Is not the essential work of the pope to mend hearts and souls and individuals and communities, to be a healing sign of unity in the large community we call the Church and the larger community we call our world?

The very nature of a fisherman is to provide food for others. Fish gives sustenance. Our popes continually, by encyclicals, talks, visits and example, are in the business of giving living food to those who will listen and eat of the bread of life.

Often at night, in the deep of a lake or beyond the sight of the shore, fishermen are searching for something they cannot see. When they lose sight of land, they experience both wonderment and fear at the same time. Is that not the fundamental work of an evangelist - and every pope is our chief evangelist - to seek out the lost and unknown or those he has no idea might be listening to him in the furthest reaches of the world, the world of communication, and closer to home, right outside his very window at Rome?

The job of a fisherman is one marked by unpredictability. He can be fishing all night and catch nothing and return with an empty fish box. On other nights, the net is overflowing with fish. Fishing is his business. A fisherman can never give up. He has mouths to feed. A pope never gives up. He has children to feed. Successes and failures are a regular part of his job description. Only an inner light keeps him going, and a hope beyond all hope.

Fishing places are always in the setting where the handiworks of God our creator are most visible. A pope is called daily, sustained in fact, by God. A fisherman

understands this and rejoices in God the creator.

Fishing is often thought of as a solitary adventure. Quite the contrary, for groups often fish together. The papacy, albeit seemingly a very solitary existence, requires the Holy Father to work in communion with so many other “fishers of men.” It is at once a solitary and joint adventure for souls.

As we review details of the life of a fisherman, I invite you to reflect on the life of Peter, the fisherman. In some way, these qualities which the Lord Jesus clearly saw in Peter’s profession have helped define the qualities of the mission of those successors in the line of the papacy from the beginning. Each was, and is, a “fisher of men.”

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