

Lovers Of Christ

St Peter the Great-Hearted

St Paul the Zealous Missionary

St John the Beloved Disciple

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St. Peter the Great-Hearted

THE twelve men upon whom Christ laid the foundations of His Church were the most interesting group that the world has seen. No two of them were alike; none of them were educated in our sense, and yet, with one exception, all of them fulfilled the task Christ gave them to do. What was St. Peter like, and why did Christ select him as His First Vicar on earth?

St. Peter was a fisherman on the inland Sea of Galilee. He was a successful fisherman for he owned a large boat. Andrew, his brother, brought him to Jesus. "Simon, we have found the Master." Peter believed Andrew for he came without argument. Christ looked deeply into the eyes of Peter, saying: "You are Simon, Son of John. From now on you shall be called Cephas, which means rock." Here at their first meeting Christ indicated what He will do with Peter. Peter did not understand the significance in the change of name, but was so attracted to Jesus that he gave up his active life as a fisherman, and, since his wife was now dead, he became the constant companion of Jesus for three years.

At this time Peter was a young man in his early thirties. He was full of enthusiasm, bubbling over with eagerness and energy. But he was impulsive, hot-headed, and not waiting to think he blurted out whatever came to mind. There was a big share of the Celtic temperament in his make-up. Christ saw the qualities of his big heart, and the wonderful potentialities of his generous nature.

On the evening of the day of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes Christ sent the Apostles down to the lake to sail to Bethsaida. Then He told the crowd to go home and went up to the mountain to pray (St. Mark 6:46). As the night advanced, a storm broke over the sea; the boat was tossed on the waves, and the Apostles had to lower sail and work hard at the oars. In the fourth watch of the night, (3a.m. to 6a.m.) Jesus came to them, walking upon the sea. They were afraid, thinking it was an apparition; but Jesus assured them: "It is I, fear not, all of you." Peter could not restrain himself in the boat at seeing the Master. Standing up he cried out: "Lord, if it be You, bid me come to You upon the waters." And Jesus said: "Come." Eagerly Peter jumped overboard and walked on the waters towards Jesus. The great white-topped waves rushing under his feet frightened Peter, his nerve gave way, and he began to sink, crying: "Lord, save me." And immediately Jesus stretching forth His hand took hold of him, and said to him: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Then Jesus with Peter came into the boat, and the wind ceased. “And they, that were in the boat, came and adored Jesus saying: Indeed You are the son of God.” (St. Matt. 14: 24-33.)

“LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?”

About daybreak the Apostles berthed their little ship at Bethsaida, where most of them lived, and an hour or so later they accompanied Jesus to Capharnaum. This was to be a memorable day, a day of promise and trial. Many, who had witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes yesterday, walked around the shore and came to Capharnaum where Jesus was preaching in the synagogue. They interrupted the sermon asking for a sign from Heaven to prove that He was the Messiah.

Jesus gave them the astonishing answer: “I am the living Bread which came down from Heaven. If any man shall eat of this Bread, he shall live for ever, and the Bread that I will give is My Flesh, for the life of the world.” A tumult burst forth, and one shrill, incessant cry was heard, “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?” This question shows that the Jews understood that Our Lord meant exactly what He said. With them it was a question of how can this Man give us His flesh to eat and still live? Jesus answered their “how” by using the solemn double words: “Amen, amen, I say to you, except you eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of the Son of Man, you shall not have life in you.” “Then,” says St. John, “many of His disciples went away, and walked no more with Him.” Jesus let them go, He did not call them back, made no explanation. Instead, He turned to the Apostles, saying: “Will you also go away?” Peter, whom Jesus had upheld on the sea that morning, answered for all. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have known that You are Christ the Son of God” (John 6: 43-70).

Peter, generous loyal, great-hearted Peter, is hurt to the quick by this mass desertion and rushes to defend and to support his Leader. Surely this magnificent profession of faith and loyalty which poured from his heart on the spur of the moment reveals Peter at his best, and at that level there is none of the Apostles his equal.

“AT YOUR WORD I WILL LET DOWN THE NET”

On that day when Jesus sat in Peter's boat and from it taught the people, Jesus said to Peter: “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon, answering, said to Him: Master, we have laboured all the night, and have taken nothing, but at Your word I will let down the net” (St. Luke 5: 4-5).

Obedying the Lord's command Peter cast his net into the sea, and in reward for his humility and confidence caught a miraculous draught of fishes and then realized the doubts he had harboured, doubts born of a life-long experience of this Sea of Galilee, whose every mood and temper he had studied as a fisherman. If old salts could not catch a fish in the dim light of dawn what chance had they in the noon-day brilliance? The others, with incredible grins, watched Peter sail the boat out into the deep, and they chuckled at what testy Peter was thinking and what he should have liked to say to Christ. The reward for Peter's “at Your word I will let down the net” was so sudden and startling that urgent signals summoned the other boats to take the overflowing catch. St. Luke tells us of Peter's generous reparation for his doubts.

“Which when Simon Peter saw, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying: Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was wholly astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of fishes which they had taken.” (St. Luke. 5: 9-10).

Jesus was grateful for this humble confession, and knowing how hard it was for Peter to keep his tongue from arguing, rewarded him, saying, "Fear not, from henceforth you shall catch men" (St. Luke: 5: 11).

"LOVE YOU ME?"

St. John records the triple test of love which Jesus put on Peter. "At that time, Jesus said to Simon Peter: Simon, son of John, love you Me more than these? He says to Him: Yea, Lord, You know that I love You. He says to him: Feed My lambs. He says to him again: Simon, son of John, love you Me? He said to Him: Yea, Lord, You know that I love You. He said to him: Feed my lambs. He says to Him the third time: Love you Me? And he says to Him: Lord, You know all things: You know that I love You. He said to him: Feed my sheep." (St. John 21: 15-17).

When Christ selected the twelve Apostles, He did not question them on their birth and breeding, on their schooling and talents, on their wealth or influence. No, He had but one test for an Apostle, namely: "If you love Me, follow Me." Before St. Peter is appointed Chief Pastor and Shepherd of the lambs and sheep of Christ's flock, Christ searches Peter's heart with the triple question: "Love you Me more than these?" Peter took the first two calmly but the third tried him severely, yet, he conquered his natural irritation, and only said: "Surely, Lord, You know me inside and out, and You know that I truly and sincerely love You more than all the rest." Our Lord must have looked with eyes of gratitude on Peter as He gave him charge of bishops and priests: "Feed My Sheep."

PETER IN THE GARDEN

Let us watch Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane. He sees the crowd with weapons and sticks threatening Jesus. Up to now he had been dazed, did not quite understand what was happening, for he had slept since supper. But this is something he understands. Peter cannot argue but Peter can fight. He steps forward, a sword flicks out from beneath his cloak, and one of the crowd screams in pain. It is Malchus, servant of the high priest. Jesus turns and rebukes Peter: "Put up your sword." Peter hangs on to the sword but the crowd are too many and they wrench it from him. Peter, helpless and unarmed, with tears of rage in his eyes, runs to get the others.

Not finding the others Peter followed the crowd at a safe distance, and got into the courtyard of the high priest. Peter is no coward, and yet, within a short time he denies that he ever knew Christ. A hush falls upon the crowd around the fire. They look up at the balcony to see Jesus being led away by the soldiers. Peter's eyes meet the eyes of his Master and from that day until his death, nearly thirty years later, Peter's eyes never dried.

"WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

For twenty-five years St. Peter ruled the infant Church from Rome. In the year 67, Nero, the Emperor, fancied himself as a musician, so he had the bright idea to burn Rome so that he might play better. The fire was a success but the playing was not. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and a drastic persecution followed. Peter, arguing on human lines, decided that he would be safe out of Rome, so under cover of night he stole out of the city. On the Appian Way he met Christ, coming towards Rome. "Quo vadis?" asked Peter, "Where are You going?" "Back to Rome to be crucified again," answered Christ. Peter took the hint and returned to his martyrdom. His one request to be crucified head down was granted. He was an old man then. His shoulders had tasted the whips of the Romans. His eyes, once farseeing as a keen fisherman, were dim and weak from weeping. His cheeks had deep furrows worn by his constant tears of repentance and love.

What a big-hearted man was Peter!

How we love to think of his unpredictable ways! No calm, calculating lover he: no measuring of his loyalty and devotion. No, he might speak and act first and think afterwards, but how transparent is his sincerity and how deep is his loyalty to his Master! Peter was a man after Christ's own heart, and it is so easy to see why this great-hearted man was chosen by Christ to be the rock upon which to build His Church.

Even in life how richly Christ rewarded Peter for his love. On Mount Thabor, in His Transfiguration, Christ gave Peter a preview of the Beatific Vision of Heaven, and out from that big heart came Peter's words: "Lord, it is good for us to be here." Peter is honoured as the first Pope in return for his great love. Peter was the instrument selected by the Holy Spirit to write some of the Epistles.

St. Paul the Zealous Missionary

St. Paul fell in love with Jesus Christ on that day he rode to Damascus, when his horse, frightened by a blinding light, threw him to the ground. Lying there Jesus appeared to him, spoke to him, and won him completely. The image of Jesus was imprinted on his mind and kept alive in his heart never to be forgotten. Jesus selected St. Paul in this extraordinary manner because He saw the mighty heart within him, and that heart Christ filled with love and fashioned into the zealous apostle Paul. That vision of Christ did more for St. Paul than any course of study.

St. Paul's fourteen epistles breathe the spirit of that apparition and come from a heart on fire with love. From that moment his apostleship began. In his remarkable missionary life St. Paul was not so much spreading a cause as following a Person. A personal love of Jesus filled his heart with the driving force of fire that made him all things to all men. Throughout his life, in every circumstance, St. Paul looked inward to Jesus Christ within him as the solution and answer to every question that life brought to him.

"Cor Pauli, cor Christi," said St. John Chrysostom: "The heart of Paul is the Heart of Christ." The Apostle himself says: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 3: 20). Listen to those glowing words of the big-hearted Apostle:

"I count all things to be but loss... that I may gain Christ"

(Phil. 3: 8).

The Christian ought to "Have the same mind as Christ" (Phil. 2: 5). Let us always converse with Jesus within our hearts. "Whatsoever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him"

(Col. 3: 17).

Confidence in Christ abiding within us makes St. Paul cry: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? For in all these things we overcome because of Him that has loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels, nor principalities, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"

(Rom. 8:35-39).

The vision of Jesus Christ inspired St. Paul to pray this grace for each one of us: "That He should grant you according to the riches of His glory to be strengthened by His Spirit, with might unto the inward man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that being rooted and founded in charity, you may be able to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth, and length, and height and depth, to know also the charity of Christ which surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God"

(Ep. 1: 3-12).

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST. PAUL

The life of sanctifying grace begins at Baptism when Christ enters our souls as a Divine Guest. Through the indwelling Christ we begin to live and grow in holiness. St. Paul tells us: "You are dead and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). By Baptism we are dead to the life of nature; but born again children of God. Christ is within us, to be developed unto the perfect age. We are to put on Christ. St. Paul appeals to us: "Put on Jesus Christ, all of you. You have been clothed with Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3: 27). This is the heart of the wonderful doctrine of St. Paul, the principal aim of his preaching, and the recurring theme of his writings. "We have been grafted on Christ" (Rom. 6: 5), he writes, and as a result our barren and sterile life has been changed into a life bearing fruits unto eternity. St. Paul does not hesitate to exclaim: "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:26). Recall his celebrated comparison with the head and the members of the body. He writes: "For as the body is one, and has many members: and all the members of the body whereas they are many, yet are one body, so also is Christ... You are the body of Christ and members of member" (I Cor. 12: 12-27).

This idea of St. Paul is the foundation of the whole spiritual life. It is marvellous in its simplicity. The soul in sanctifying grace possesses Christ within her. Our growth in holiness is reduced to one idea which is at the same time a glorious ideal. St. Paul advises us to renounce ourselves in order to allow Christ to do all things in us. At each hour, in every action we perform, let us say to ourselves: "I will not live this act but let Christ live it in me." It was the practice of St. Vincent de Paul to say to himself before each action: "How would Christ do this?"

This ideal of making room for Christ by stripping the soul in order to clothe it with Christ was lived and preached by St. John the Baptist. "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

ST. PAUL'S IDEAL LIVED TODAY

St. Paul's ideal of a life in the Name of Jesus must be applied to our every day living through thinking in the heart. It is an ideal open to all. Jesus is within our hearts through sanctifying grace and consequently our spiritual life will guard that heart of ours, and we shall listen to His whisperings and obey the least impulses He gives that He may live perfectly within us.

The sublime spirituality of St. Paul has a modern interpreter in St. John Eudes, (canonized in 1925, died in 1680) who writes: "As St. Paul assures us that he fills up the sufferings of Christ, so we may say in truth that a true Christian, who is a member of Jesus Christ, and united with Him by grace, continues and carries to completion, by every action performed in the spirit of Jesus Christ, the actions which Christ Himself performed during the time of His peaceful life on earth. So that, when a Christian prays, he continues the prayer of Jesus during His life on earth; when he works he makes up what was wanting to the life and conversation of Jesus. We must be like Jesus upon earth,

continuing His life and His actions, doing and suffering all in the Spirit of Jesus, that is to say, in holy and divine dispositions” (Kingdom of Jesus).

The great Flemish painter, Janssens, has represented in a beautiful picture Jesus Christ standing on the Mount of the Beatitudes with arms outstretched, saying: “My son, give Me your heart.” This painting symbolizes St. Paul’s doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Christ says to each one of us: “My son, lend Me your heart, so that I may look upon it as My Own, and cause My virtues to shine forth in it, and in this way continue My life on earth and satisfy My intense love for My heavenly Father.”

The Prophet David in the “Miserere” psalm asks of the Lord: “Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” In a word, we strive to be one with Jesus. St. Margaret Mary narrates in the notes she left behind her: “The Friday of the Octave of Corpus Christi, after Communion, my Jesus said to me, ‘My daughter, I have come to you to substitute My soul for yours, My heart and My spirit in place of yours, so that you may henceforth live only by and for Me.’ This grace had such an effect that nothing has subsequently been able to trouble the peace of my soul, and my heart has no power except to love God only.”

JOY COMES FROM LOVE OF GOD

Life for all of us is a mixture of joy and sorrow. St. Paul challenges us: “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice” (Phil. 4: 4). God has created us His children for joy. The prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper bids us live in joy. “Holy Father I pray that they may have My joy filled in themselves” (St. John 17: 13).

Joy is a worship to give to God. It is the barometer of the soul. The Church never ceases to rejoice. She counts her days by the feasts. She may march in sorrows and persecutions but her eyes are raised to heaven singing the perfection and love of her Spouse. The Church lives in joy, a joy free, serene and strong, the fruit of love. The good Christian is a sower of joy, that is why he does great things. For joy is one of the irresistible powers of the world; it pacifies, disarms, conquers, and draws to itself. The joyous soul is an apostle, drawing men to God, manifesting what is produced by the presence of God. That is why the Holy Spirit gives this counsel:

“Be not sad, for the joy of the Lord, is our strength” (II Esdras [Nehemiah], 8:10).

St. Paul tells us that because we are children of God through adoption our supernatural vocation is to be joyous. Joy wells up within us because of the abiding presence of Jesus in our souls. “Sursum Corda”, lift up your hearts and be conformed to Jesus, look at Jesus, imitate Jesus, live like Jesus, become Jesus. And this is possible to everyone, priests and religious, virgins and married, old and young, through thinking in the Heart of Him that abides with us for ever.

The lives of the saints assure us that “a merry heart pleases the Lord”. When the heroic St. Thomas More staggered his way up the rickety steps of the scaffold, he murmured: “A merry heart goes all the way.” Therefore let us from henceforth fashion our inner selves according to the counsel of St. Paul: “Be therefore, all of you, followers of God, as most dear children: and walk in love, as Christ also has loved us, and has delivered Himself for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God for an odour of sweetness” (Phil. 5:1-2).

ST. PAUL ANSWERS PAIN.

Then comes the cross of suffering, mental and bodily, and how shall we bear it? St. Paul has a wonderful answer to the problem of pain and suffering. He writes: "I fill up in my flesh those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ" (Col. 1:24). He calls on us to suffer in close companionship with Jesus, "always bearing about in our body the mortifications of Jesus" (II Cor. 4:7).

"With Christ I am nailed to the cross" (Gal. 2:19) is St. Paul's determination to imitate Christ's sufferings and to reproduce His Passion in his own life.

Jesus wishes to reproduce and continue His own life in us, and that includes the Mystery of His Passion. If we build up a habit of thinking like this we shall face sufferings joyfully and bear them valiantly. Thinking in the heart will steel and strengthen us to bear mortification of body and soul in as joyous a way as possible, but always from the motive of love of Jesus. Pain and sorrow help us to make more room for Jesus to live in us. If we get into the habit of looking upon crosses as the means of substituting our beloved Jesus with His infinite perfections for our worthless selves, we shall grow to love them and become more joyous and courageous in carrying them. To practise mortification means to become Christ-like, to come closer to perfect union with Jesus. This is the thought which ought to animate and strengthen our desire for continual self-effacement. To die to self is not to die, but to be born again to live in God.

St. John the Beloved Disciple

The feast day of St. John the Evangelist is celebrated two days after Christmas. It is both right and proper that the feast of the chief Evangelist of the divinity of Christ should be held within the Octave to disclose the greatness of the Infant Who lies in the manger. The Infant God in the crib gathers around Him pure souls. Mary is the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph the chaste spouse, St. Stephen the first martyr who washes his robe in the blood of the Lamb, and then St. John the virgin apostle. Crowned with the halo of those who knew how to conquer their flesh, for this reason St. John became "the disciple whom Jesus loved, and who also leaned on His breast at the Last Supper" (St. John. 21: 20). Thanks to his angelic purity St. John was filled with the divine wisdom of the love of God and in the Epistle of the Mass of St. John (in the Liturgy of St Pius V) the Church applies to him a celebrated passage from the Books of Wisdom, the Book of Ecclesiasticus. "She shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and shall clothe him with the robe of glory. The Lord our God shall heap upon him a treasure of joy and gladness, and shall cause him to inherit an everlasting name"

(Ecclesiasticus 15: 6).

This gift of the wisdom of the love of God won for St. John the title of Doctor and the Introit of his Mass is the one the Church uses in the Common of Doctors. (This is used in the Liturgies of Pope Paul VI and of Pius V.) It is to St. John who wrote the fourth Gospel, three Epistles, and the Apocalypse, that we owe the most beautiful pages on the Divinity of the Word made flesh. St. John received the halo of martyr, since he only escaped a violent death by the special protection of God. He was last of the Apostles to die.

THE APOSTLE OF LOVE

Well indeed has St. John said: "Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." Love tends always to union. Throughout His active ministry Jesus had striven to attract men

to Himself in love. This was the object of the whole nights He spent in prayer on the hills of Judea. His many miracles, His tender pity to the sick and suffering, and His earnest exhortations sought to win man's love. Even His severe reproofs and denunciations were but efforts to save by fear those who could not be won by love. At the Last Supper it is all love. His parting gift is Himself "to you and to many" in Holy Communion, the perfect union of perfect love. When they had received Holy Communion, Jesus said to the apostles: "Little children, yet a little while I am with you... A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another as I have loved you"

(St. John. 13: 33-34).

It was a new commandment: the old one, as Jesus quoted it to the scribe, was: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (St. Mark 12: 31). But this new one is to love our neighbour as Jesus did, even to the utter abandonment of self. It was new also in this respect, that the Jews regarded no one as a neighbour who was not of their own race, whereas this commandment embraces all mankind. Further, it was new, because henceforth, not fear, but love, was to be the moving principle in all our service of God.

This new commandment which Jesus gave to the Apostles at the Last Supper when they had received their first Holy Communion so impressed Peter, James, and John, that later, writing their Epistles, they dwell upon it as essential for all.

SOARS LIKE AN EAGLE

St. John is symbolised by the noble eagle with fire in his blood. No hovering near the ground for the king of the air. No, up he soars into the clouds. The other three evangelists, Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke, give us a synopsis of the life of Christ on earth. They are historians, faithful chroniclers of events. St. John fired by his deep personal love of Christ soars to the heights of the Divinity of Christ.

The Holy Spirit in gratitude for his intense love of Christ inspired St. John to write the fourth Gospel as a proof of the Divinity of Christ. In the Apocalypse St. John tells us the rewards that await those who on earth love Jesus Christ. "And I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Apocalypse 21:2.). On this earth St. John had rich and rewarding returns for his love. He is one of the special three who were invited to Mt. Thabor to catch a glimpse of what St. Paul says "eye has not seen nor ear heard what joys the Lord has prepared for those who love Him."

At the Last Supper St. John was beside Our Lord and was permitted to lean his head on the Lord's bosom to hear the heartbeats of that loving God. It was St. John that accompanied Mary to Calvary and from the Cross was appointed Mary's son and support. "Behold your mother," words from the Cross, opened out a new life for St. John, a life into which Mary entered as his mother, and he became her second son, her other priestly son.

MASS IN MARY'S PRESENCE

It was his great joy and honour to say Mass in the presence of Mary, to consecrate the Sacred Host, and place It upon Mary's tongue, saying: "Mary, behold your Son. Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world". What a sacred moment that was upon which the angelic court of Heaven gazed in wondrous admiration

Who could have said a more acceptable Mass than St. John, inspired and helped by Mary's presence and by Mary's praying the Mass with him! Let us invite the beloved disciple to kneel beside us at Mass and to share with us his faith in the Real Presence, and his love and gratitude for such a gift as the Blessed Eucharist as Sacrament and Sacrifice. It was St. John's distinction to be at the Last Supper to hear Christ's command to His priests: "Do this in commemoration of Me". He stood beneath the Cross, broken-hearted indeed but enlightened as no other Priest has been in the Divine Mystery of the Sacrifice of the Cross. For the years following Good Friday he offered the Mass with Mary present to link in his offering the Victim of Calvary and the Victim of the Mass, Jesus Christ Whom Mary and St. John loved beyond human imagination. Then when Mary is assumed into Heaven St. John receives the gift to write from his heart his Gospel, his three Epistles, and the Apocalypse.

He lived to a great old age, blessed with a deep peace of soul, and supreme confidence in the love of Christ. To all who gathered around him as the last living witness of Jesus Christ St. John spoke of charity, the love of God and the love of one's neighbour for God's sake, as words of wisdom winnowed from such a long and eventful life. His last years were echoes of his Master's last words spoken at the Last Supper: "Little children! A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another"

(St. John 13: 33-35).
