

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Except for Jesus, no figure receives more attention in the passion narratives than Peter. The evangelists differ in recounting many significant details about Jesus' final days (what he said at the Last Supper, who was present at his crucifixion, what words he spoke from the cross), but the four gospels agree in relating that Peter denied Jesus three times. Nowhere else in the passion narratives do all the gospels so converge. The story of Peter's denials is an extraordinarily vivid one, filled with colorful details which captured the imagination of the early Christians and remained fixed in their memories: Peter's following Jesus timidly from a distance to the courtyard of the high priest; his warming himself at a blazing fire, where a servant girl recognizes him; his slipping outside furtively to escape her persistent questions; the bystanders' recognizing his Galilean accent; his regressing in three steps from evasion, to denial, to a curse and an oath; the cock's crowing and Jesus' glancing at Peter at precisely the moment of the third denial; his remembering Jesus' prophetic words and weeping bitterly.

In reflecting on Peter's denials, it is important to recall that they have a prelude and a sequence.

Notice three scenes in the prelude. In the earliest scene, a more peaceful one, Peter professes his faith in Jesus publicly (Mk 8:29; Mt 16:16); but now, at the beginning of the passion, he denies with an oath that he even knows him. In a second scene, at the Last Supper, Peter asserts: "Even though all are shaken in faith, it will not be that way with me!" (Mk 14:29), evoking Jesus' prophecy: "I give you my assurance, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" (14:30). Peter insists: "Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you" (14:31); but his words are sheer bravado. Mark's gospel ends the Last Supper abruptly with this unrealistic boast and the drama shifts to the Garden of Olives, where the third scene in the prelude takes place. In the garden, Jesus says to Peter, James and John: "Watch and pray" (cf. Mk 14:34-38). They fall asleep. Then Jesus singles out Peter: "Asleep, Simon? Could you not stay awake for even an hour? Watch and pray that you may not be put to the test. The spirit is willing but nature is weak" (Mk 14:37-38). Watch! Pray! In the prelude, Peter does neither. He does not prepare for the great test which is about to unfold.

The meaning of all this is quite clear, especially in Mark's gospel. Mark is telling us that the disciple who is first named (1:16) and last named (16:7), the one who first professed Jesus publicly (8:29) and who vaunted his willingness to follow Jesus even to death (14:31) fell asleep, did not pray, fled at the crucial moment, and denied with an oath that he even knew Jesus. He was completely unprepared to take up the cross with the Lord and follow him (8:34).

Of course the sequel is a much happier story. Though Peter is slow to believe even after the resurrection (cf. Lk 24:11), Jesus appears to him (Lk 24:34) and leads him to repentance so that, having been converted, he begins to strengthen others (cf. Lk 22:32). Peter professes his love for the Lord three times (Jn 21:15-17), paralleling his three denials. He takes his place as leader of the Twelve, the evangelist of the circumcised (Gal 2:7), and a pillar of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9).

Is there any more apt Lenten figure than Peter? Lent is the time for renewing our baptismal profession of faith, for redirecting our lives to the Lord, for resolving anew to take up our cross and follow Jesus. This Lent let me offer you three reflections suggested by Peter's role in the passion narratives.

1. The first reflection is very simple, and very stark too. One need not be a psychiatrist to penetrate the reasons for Peter's failure. He was quite unaware of his own weakness; he was cocky rather than humble. Contrary to Jesus' repeated plea, he did not watch and he did not pray. Peter's weakness stands out all the more forcefully in Mark's gospel if we recall the words with which Jesus, just before the beginning of the passion narrative, introduces a final parable: "Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come" (13:33). So, Peter's story poses rather direct questions to us this Lent: Do we recognize our own fragility? Do we stand before the Lord humbly, conscious that we "hold his gifts in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7)? Are we alert, on the watch? Are our eyes open to see the Lord still agonizing in the garden? Do we recognize his anguish in street people huddled in doorways for protection against the cold? Does his suffering glance, mirrored in the eyes of hungry children or hopeless mothers, touch our hearts? Do we pray humbly and steadfastly, as Jesus asks? His questioning words to Peter contain one of the most fundamental challenges in the New Testament: "Could you not stay awake for even an hour? Watch and pray that you may not be put to the test" (Mk 14:37). Do we take seriously the urgent imperative of the first of two New Testament letters attributed to Peter, or do we gloss over it as old-fashioned, figurative language: "Be sober and watch, for your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion walks about seeking whom he will devour" (1 Pt 5:8)?

2. In many eras during the history of the Church, hagiographers have hesitated to mention the faults of the saints. The evangelists had no such scruples. They speak with great frankness about Peter's infidelity. But a subtle pedagogy of hope underlies the recounting of this story. The account of Peter's denials does not have a final negative thrust. Rather, the New Testament writers note his renewed, positive role in the post-Resurrection life of the Church (Lk 24:34; Acts 1:15; 1:22; 2:14; 3:1; 4:8; 5:29; 8:32ff; 10:9ff; 1 Cor 15:5). Peter's story is meant to encourage Christians who were already suffering persecution by the time the gospels were written. His death as a martyr, somewhere around the year 64 A.D., stood as a clear witness that, having failed initially, he eventually took up his cross with courage and followed Jesus. Surely, in difficult times, many early Christians, like Peter, experienced their own weaknesses and failed, as we do. But the evangelists assured them that there is hope: change, growth, conversion are always possible. Can great weakness, grave failures, and repentant love coexist within the same person? Peter's story says *yes*.

3. As they tell us about Peter, the evangelists also offer us a dose of sober Christian realism in regard to those who exercise authority in the Church. History provides us with countless examples of authority figures who, like Peter, have been unfaithful. So, in reading the passion narratives' vivid account of Peter's denials, it is very important that we who exercise authority humbly acknowledge our own sinfulness. Are you surprised when you note evident faults in those whom the Lord has called to the service of authority? Christian realism teaches us that it has always been so, not just with Peter, not just with the other apostles who fled, but also with popes, bishops, provincials, and local superiors. The same is true of other authority figures in society, like parents, teachers, judges, doctors. The Church is populated by saints and sinners. In fact, there is a mixture of the saint and the sinner in each of us. Sin and grace struggle deep within the heart of every Christian, including those in authority. The gospels proclaim that, as in the case of Peter, grace will win out (even in us authority figures!) — if, of course, we are disposed to watch and pray.

Those are my thoughts this Lent. In the words of the second letter attributed to Peter in the New Testament, I ask the crucified and risen Lord to strengthen all of us in these days, so that we might keep our eyes fixed on him constantly as “on a lamp shining in a dark place until the first streaks of dawn appear and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pt 1:19).

Your brother in St. Vincent,
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Superior General