

HAVING FAITH IN THE LORD

Excerpted from a Sermon by Rev. Kurt Horigan Asplundh

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...” (Matthew 16:18).

Simon Peter was one of the first disciples the Lord called. More is written of him in the Gospels than about any other of the twelve. He was their leader, the most outspoken of these men. Peter is presented as a figure of great contrasts. On one memorable occasion when the Lord questioned His disciples about what people thought of Him, it was Peter who declared Him to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The Lord blessed Peter for this confession of his faith. The foundation stone of Christianity is this acknowledgment of the Lord’s Divine nature. So Peter was rightly named a stone or rock because his confession is the rock upon which the Lord could build His church.

Yet, soon after, when Peter rebuked the Lord for talking of His death, the Lord called him “Satan” and said, “You are an offense to Me.” “Get behind Me, Satan! ...[Y]ou are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23). Peter’s faith had wavered.

In what is perhaps the best known incident about him recorded in the Gospels, Peter denied the Lord three times on the very night he had said, “I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death” (Luke 22:33). There is no denying human weakness.

But it was a different Peter who dove into the sea to swim ashore to see the Lord when He appeared later, after the resurrection. This was when the Lord asked Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” “Simon, son of Jonah,” the Lord said (for He rarely called him Peter), “Do you love Me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter answered, “You know that I love You.” Then the Lord added this beautiful and inspiring charge—“Feed My lambs” (John 21:15). He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter said, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Then the Lord charged Peter: “Tend My sheep” (John 21:16). He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” When Peter answered a third time, grieved because he perceived his weakness in the Lord’s words, he said: “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” The Lord said, “Feed My sheep.” With these words He placed a great responsibility upon Peter. He placed the work of the church on the one who had denied Him three times.

So there are two primary things about Peter that we think of: first, the great contrasts in his discipleship, and, second, the important commission the Lord gave him.

Peter represents a quality. All the natural things mentioned in the Word, including the people that are described, picture spiritual realities. This is what makes the Word a Divine and holy writ. There is a spiritual sense contained within everything that is there. And this sense has now been revealed by the Lord for the New Church. When we know this, the account of Peter takes on new depth of meaning. New insights are revealed into the nature of our own life and what the Lord expects of us, His disciples.

Peter represents faith. But faith can be of two kinds: true or dead. It can be a faith alive with inner love from the Lord: as the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church says, “faith from charity.” It can

also be a hollow or dead shell of intellectual reasoning or patterned belief. This is described in the Heavenly Doctrine as “faith separated from charity” (*Apocalypse Explained* 820).

The reason the Word shows Peter to be a man of contrasts is to illustrate the contrast between the two kinds of faith represented by him. Peter was capable of doing exalted things—of reaching the heights—but he was also capable of utter failure and of giving offense. Peter could express the essential truth of the church: recognizing the Divine nature of His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But he could, in another state, weakly deny that he was even one of the Lord’s followers. How could Peter turn back from such deep acknowledgment? Because this is the nature of faith that is not living from within.

On the night of His betrayal, as the disciples gathered with the Lord for the Last Supper, the Lord predicted Peter’s denial. “Simon, Simon!” He said, “Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:31-32). And later, as Peter stood with the Lord on the shore, following the great catch of fish, the Lord gave him the charge to feed and tend the sheep.

Is this not the characteristic of faith? It may fail when it stands apart from the Lord’s love, but when it is revived, it teaches and strengthens the church. Faith without charity is weak, and it is represented by Peter’s denials. A true faith, which can lead and instruct the church, is represented by the Lord’s commission to Peter.

To be living and valuable, faith must stand with love. This is shown in the dialogue by the sea. The Lord asked not twice but three times, “Do you love Me?” Unless faith has within it love of the Lord and is enlivened by charity, it cannot serve or instruct the church. The truth must spring from the good of love.

What is said about Peter applies to each of us as well. We are all disciples of the Lord, and so the Lord might well ask each one of us, “Do you love Me?” Have we strengthened our faith by hearing what the Lord teaches and by practicing it? If not, our spiritual life will grow old, harden into merely traditional patterns, and finally die.

The Lord’s charge, too, is to each one of us: “Feed My lambs,” “Tend My sheep,” “Feed My sheep.” The circle of life is completed in this charge. Not only must our faith be from love, it must also look to use. The feeding and tending that Peter was told to do signify the uses that are to be done by those who have faith. Love to the Lord exists in use, and we are told that the conjunction of the Lord with a person is in use (see *Divine Wisdom* xi:3).

True faith seeks expression in the life of charity and there, in action, finds permanence and stability. When faith is merely an idea, without consequent action, it is like the boast of Peter when he said, “I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death” (Luke 22:33). In fact, this faith failed him in the test. On the other hand, a faith which brings forth fruit in the works of charity is thereby confirmed, made strong, and endures.

The Lord’s charge to Peter at the beginning of the Christian Church is also a commission to every person who has a faith in the Lord. If we are to abide in that faith and strengthen it, we must exercise it in the works of charity.

Then, when it comes time for the Lord to ask of us, “Do you love Me?,” we will truly be able to answer, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.”