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CATECHESIS ON THE PAPACY

Peter, the Risen Lord and the Early Church

By Father Gerald O'Collins, S.J.

According to the Vatican, in all likelihood, the Catholic Church will have a new pope—the 265th Successor of St. Peter—by Easter, March 31, 2013. The timing of this papal election raises the question: Is the ministry of the pope affected or even shaped in a particular way by the resurrection of the crucified Jesus? Is preaching the Risen Lord at the heart of what St. Peter and his successors do for the Church?

We might be inclined to say no, when we recall the famous and matching passages from Matthew 16 and John 21. In the first, Jesus promises Peter: “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church; and I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

In the second passage, the risen Jesus makes good on his promise and commissions Peter: “Feed my lambs and feed my sheep.” These two texts are regularly cited by those who explain the Petrine ministry. They are written for all to read inside the Basilica of St. Peter’s in Rome. A promise made during the ministry of Jesus and its fulfillment after the resurrection have decisively shaped and supported the belief that Catholics and some other Christians hold about the role of Peter.

Yet St. Paul writing around 55 A.D. and St. Luke writing perhaps two decades later alert us to something else that might fill out our picture of what Peter and his successor do for the whole Church and the world. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul struggles to meet various problems that have arisen in the church of

Corinth. One concerns the reality of Jesus’ glorious resurrection from the dead and its implications for Christian faith and life. The apostle challenges doubts and misconceptions by reminding the Corinthian Christians of a very early piece of preaching that he had handed on to them: ‘Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; he was buried; he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures; he appeared to Cephas [Peter] and then to the Twelve’ (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

In his list of witnesses to the resurrection, Paul and the tradition that he quotes put Peter in first place. St. Luke confirms this in a similar formulation that he derives from early Christian sources and introduces at the end the Emmaus story: “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon [Peter]” (Luke 24:34). Seemingly Luke inserts this item to head off any impression that the Emmaus appearance is the primary one. Even before Cleopas and his companion return, Peter’s testimony has brought to Easter faith “the Eleven” and “those who were with them” (Luke 24:33). The report from Emmaus and the later appearances of the Lord strengthen this faith, but do not evoke it for the first time.

In the first half of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will follow this up by telling his readers what Peter said and did as the primary witness to the resurrection. Right from the day of the first Pentecost, Peter acts as the head of a college of Easter witnesses by announcing the good news: “This Jesus you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless

men. But God has raised him up and of that all of us are witnesses” (Acts 2:23-24, 32).

Along with the other Apostles and authoritative figures in the emerging Church, Peter is empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news to the world and to feed Christ’s “lambs and sheep” by teaching, leading and sanctifying them. This threefold ministry finds its central focus through preaching the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

Beyond question, Peter may not have been chronologically the first disciple to see the risen Jesus. St. John reports that near his open and empty tomb, the Lord first appeared to St. Mary Magdalene alone (John 20:11-18). St. Matthew is in basic agreement but adds a second figure: he pictures Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (Matthew 28:1, 9-10). Beato Angelico, Titian and other great artists have made the scene of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene familiar around the world. We are faced with two ancient traditions: that Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene (Matthew and John) or that Jesus first appeared to Peter (Paul in 1 Corinthians, and Luke).

The appearance to Mary Magdalene led early Christian writers to call her “the apostle to the apostles” and “another Eve who announced not death but life to the men.” As those who first discovered Jesus’ tomb to be open and empty and as messengers of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene and other female disciples helped to set the Church going.

Yet Peter played the main leadership role in leading the emerging Church. In doing this, his prominence among the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus was clearly a key factor - not the only factor but a key factor.

Likewise, the Twelve, Paul, Barnabas, married couples (for instance, Prisca and Aquila and Andronicus and Junia -- Romans 16:3, 7) and many other disciples announced to the world Christ’s glorious victory over death. By their words and deeds, they testified to this unique good news. Among all those witnesses, Peter stood out as the leading witness to the risen Jesus.

Like Peter, the Apostles and their successors, the Holy Father is called to serve the whole Church by a threefold ministry of teaching, leading and sanctifying all its members. This threefold ministry finds its central focus when the pope announces to his diocese, the city of Rome and to the entire world the unique good news of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. May the new pope continue to serve the faith and unity of all Catholics and other Christians by proclaiming, through his words and deeds, the message at the heart of Christianity: Jesus is risen from the dead. Alleluia! Alleluia!

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