

Homily based on the readings from May 4, 2025 (Acts 5.27-32, 40b-41; Revelation 5.11-14; John 21.1-19)

*It is the Lord.* Today's Gospel takes place during the forty-day period – which we ourselves are currently celebrating – *between* the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and his Ascension into Heaven. Over the past several days and weeks, the Risen Christ has been revealing himself to a *variety* of people – including Mary Magdalene, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the eleven remaining Apostles. Today we hear about him appearing to another group – consisting of seven of his followers, including Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, and John. It is clear that Jesus is not just manifesting himself as some sort of image or hologram, but as a flesh-and-blood human being. He not only *speaks* with his Apostles – he *shares a meal* with them.

Once they are done eating, Jesus has a remarkable interaction with Simon Peter – the man he had previously identified as the *rock* on which he would build his Church. He asks him exactly the same question *three*

*times*: “Simon, son of John, do you love me? Simon, son of John, do you love me? Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter is clearly frustrated by this line of inquiry. He responds three times, with increasing levels of insistence: “Lord, you know that I love you. Lord, you know that I love you. Lord, you know *everything*; you know that I love you.” Peter wonders – as do we – why Jesus is repeating himself. Does he not accept the sincerity of Peter’s answers?

There are several layers of meaning to this dialogue, but the most *basic* explanation is almost staring us in the face. Recall the Passion narrative that we heard just over two weeks ago, on Good Friday:

Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter, “You are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ...

Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping warm. And they said to him, “You are not one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said, “Didn’t I see

you in the garden with him?” Again Peter denied it. And immediately the cock crowed.

Peter had denied Jesus three times; now he is asked to affirm his love for Christ three times. As Saint Augustine put it:

*Three times* Peter had denied in fear; *three times* he confessed out of love. By his replies and his profession of love, Peter condemned and wiped out his former fear.

In other words, Jesus is giving Peter the *opportunity* to redeem himself for his former cowardice and disloyalty.

There is another aspect to this conversation, though, that is particularly important for us to consider right now – at this particular moment in the history of the Church. Jesus is not just giving Peter a chance to *repent*, but also providing him with clear instructions about his *mission*: “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Jesus is preparing Peter for his role as the chief shepherd of the faithful, as Christ’s personal

representative on earth. In essence – through this conversation on the shore of the Sea of Galilee – Jesus is formally *inaugurating* Peter as our first pope.

Throughout the centuries, the 265 men who have succeeded Saint Peter as Bishop of Rome have all upheld and continued this ministry. Even though the external circumstances of the Church have *radically* changed, the basic role of the papacy has remained the same. The Holy Father is the Universal Shepherd, the Successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ on earth. Regardless of his age, his nationality, or his personal background, he has been entrusted – by Christ himself – with the governance of the Church and with the care of our souls.

As everyone is *certainly* aware, Pope Francis – our own beloved shepherd – passed away less than two weeks ago. (In fact, you may have noticed that a portion of this very Gospel was read at his funeral.) While we are still mourning this loss, we are also looking toward the future. On Wednesday, the process will begin through which a new

Holy Father will officially be selected. We must join together with faithful Catholics across the globe in *praying* that the Holy Spirit will guide the cardinals in their process of discernment. In doing so, however, we need to be absolutely clear about what it is we are praying *for*. To quote a Nigerian archbishop:

We are *not* praying for an African pope. We are praying for a good and Holy Pope who will shepherd the people. He can be an African, American, European, or Asian.

In other words, we are not asking God for a pope who will align with our *human* preferences – whatever those may be – but one who will serve as a *radiant* beacon of Christ’s love. Whoever steps onto that balcony in a few days, we will owe him our respect, our obedience, and – above all else – our continued prayers. The pope is not a president, not a king, but a *shepherd*. In the end, his job, and ours, can be summarized by two simple words – the *first* and the *final* command that Jesus Christ addressed to Simon Peter: *Follow me*.