



RETREAT
Tuesday, October 1, 2024

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP

Resurrection 2 Breakfast

John 21. 15 – 25

Now at last, for the first time since his denial, Jesus and Simon Peter talk to each other. It is not clear whether it was the fish being grilled or Peter! Jesus asks Peter: ‘Do you love me?’ There is not a word about his denial. What matters is now, today. Łukasz Popko OP wrote: ‘Note that Jesus did not ask about the past. He did not ask for an explanation or excuse. Secondly, he did not ask about the future: Will you love me? He did not ask for a promise: Promise that you will love me. He asked about the present! So often we avoid the question of love and the corresponding answer because we are stuck with the failures of the past or in the fantasies of the future.’¹

The Divine Office begins every day with God’s plea to us: ‘Oh that *today* you would listen to my voice.’ Today is the only day that exists, God’s present is the present. Today during this Synod we must hearken to the Lord and each other. We cannot delay. If we do so, today will be a new beginning. Shortly before he died, Cardinal Martini surprised his friend Damiano Modena when he suddenly said, ‘Il cristianesimo è solo all’inizio.’ ‘Christianity is only at the beginning’.

Why do we delay? Scepticism and inertia hold us back. My Irish brethren joke that the Irish language has 32 words for tomorrow, but none of them have the same sense of urgency as ‘mañana’! When Peter saw the Lord on the beach, he did not hesitate to throw himself into the water and swim for the land. *Carpe Diem*.

The conversation at breakfast is perhaps the most subtle and delicate in the Bible. The shame of Peter’s denial at another charcoal fire is in the air, but nothing is said explicitly. With gentleness and perhaps even a smile, Jesus opens the space for Peter to unsay three times his threefold denial. Do we rub people’s noses in the folly of what they have said or done? Or do we gently open a space for them to move on?

‘Do you love me more than these others?’ In Matthew and Mark, which John surely knew, Peter had claimed exactly that on his night of shame. ‘Even though all the others desert, I will not.’ (Mark.14.20). I love you best! And now, he does it again! There is a lot of debate about the meanings of different words for love here, *agape* and *philia*. I am convinced that Peter claims that not only does he love Jesus, he loves him with the best of all loves, *philia*, friendship. ‘Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends.’ This is

¹ Private communication.



exactly what he had failed to do. Anthony Giambrone OP, of the Ecole Biblique, translates his three replies in this way² :

‘Yes, Lord, I love you more than they do and more than I love the others. You are more; you are my friend.’

Then ‘*Phileo*: I said it and I mean it. You are my friend.’

Finally, ‘You know all things, you experience that I love with the full love of friendship.’

Note the gently irony: Peters says, ‘You know me.’ On that sad night he had denied he knew Jesus but Jesus knows him. According to the early legend, he would fail again during the Neronian persecution. Fleeing Rome, he met Christ going to the City. He asks his Lord where are you going? *Quo Vadis*? ‘To die again’. Finally Peter shows that greatest of all loves which he had twice professed and denied. Finally, at the end of his life, he is faithful to his vow of love. This gives courage to us all when we fail.

Now here is a lesson of the utmost importance for this Synod. Jesus trusted Peter, and entrusted the flock to him, although so far, he had been untrustworthy. The Church is founded on the rock of God’s unmerited trust in Simon Peter. Will we dare to trust each other, despite some failures? This Synod depends on it.

Just one example: it is no secret that *Fiducia Supplicans* provoked distress and anger among many bishops around the world. Some members of this Synod felt betrayed. But the Church will only become a trustworthy community if we take the risk, like the Lord, of trusting each other, even though we have been hurt. The Lord entrusts himself into our hands again and again, at every Eucharist, even though we betray him again and again. The sexual abuse crisis has taught us painfully that this cannot be an irresponsible trust which puts others at risk, especially minors. But a trust that embraces our *own* risk of getting hurt.

There is a global crisis of trust. Politicians of all parties say that the politicians of the *other* parties are not be trusted and so, of course, no one trusts politicians anymore. All over the world, the young are losing confidence in democracy. Fake news and the manipulation of the media mean that we cannot trust that the truth is being told. We demand more and more accountability, more tests and reports, but they can never allay our suspicion that someone is getting away with something. A crisis of trust encourages people to behave in an untrustworthy way, since everyone else is surely doing so. Clement of Alexandria wrote in the third century, that we must ‘take the beautiful risk of passing over into God’s camp.’³ That is the camp of those who trust in the Lord and each other, even when it seems foolish. We cannot say ‘I am not going risk being hurt again.’

A farmer rushed up to St Francis of Assisi and asked him if he was Francis. The farmer then said ‘I tell you do not be other than you appear to be for many people put their trust in you.’ These words scar me. If only they knew! Millions no longer trust us and with good reason. We must build trust again, beginning with each other in this assembly.

When I was elected Master of the Dominicans, I asked my predecessor, a marvellous Irishman, for his advice. He said, ‘First of all, when you travel in remote places, always have some

² *The Bible and the Priesthood: Priestly participation in the One Sacrifice for Sin*: Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2022, p.185f.

³ *Proteptique* X, 93. Quoted A.G p. 128



lavatory paper in your back pocket. (Very wise!) Secondly trust the brethren. The Order has voted to trust you. You must trust the brethren. Provincials will sometimes make decisions which puzzle you and with which you disagree. Except in exceptional circumstances, trust them'. St Dominican trusted the novices and sent them out to preach, even though the Cistercians were sure they would all run away. Trust binds Peter's net together.

One of our Provincials was a fine brother but he struggled with alcoholism. To my surprise, he was re-elected. I was proud that the Provincial chapter took the risk and I confirmed the election. Though I am reminded of American Dominican had a problem with drink, and so he went to see his doctor. The doctor said, 'Father, the very best thing that you could do would be to give up drink altogether.' The brother replied: 'Doctor, I am not worthy of the very best. What is the second best?'

Ultimately everything is founded on trust in God who entrusts himself to us. We trust that with the grace of God, this Synod will bear fruit, even though we cannot anticipate what this will be and it may not be what we want.

A poem by Teilhard de Chardin:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time⁴.

Another Jesuit (I am in a generous mood!), Gregory Boyle: 'Ours is a God who waits. Who are we not to? It takes what it takes for the great turnabout. Wait for it.'⁵

Jesus commissions Peter to pasture his sheep. *My* sheep, Jesus says, not yours. Peter is to be the good shepherd who leads the sheep out of the narrow confines of the sheepfold to feed in the broad pastures of the world, where wolves lie in wait. He knows his flock by name, and they will trust his voice. All who are baptised into the kingship of Christ are all called to be pastors: Pastors to the little flocks of our families, to the pupils of our schools, to our next-door neighbours. Parents, teachers, lay leaders are all called to be pastors who know their sheep by name and gain their trust. We all have the extraordinary responsibility of caring for the Lord's sheep.

But Jesus gives Peter a specific role in the community as his good shepherd. This is a role particularly of our ordained pastors, to lead the sheep out of a narrow introverted ecclesiastical sheepfold into the wide-open spaces of the world. From the sacristy to the public square. Yet often it has turned out to be the clergy who are most suspicious of the synodal path and resistant to it. What authority has Peter and his successors to do this?

⁴ A letter to his niece, from *Hearts on Fire*, ed. Michael Harter SJ, Loyola Press, 2009

⁵ Tattos on the Heart, p.113



Sara Paris of Edinburgh University wrote, ‘the authority of Peter is the authority of a repentant sinner.’⁶ He can lead the flock into the pasture of God’s grace because he so evidently needs it himself. Pope Francis said in an interview in 2015: “I am a sinner ... I am sure of this. I am a sinner whom the Lord looked upon with mercy. I am, as I said to detainees in Bolivia, a forgiven man.”⁷ (c.f. Luke 5.8) This is the joyful authority of the shepherds. We are forgiven people. We can let drop the heavy mask of superiority, the burden of pretending to frightfully holy. The priest gathers us all into unity at the beginning of the Eucharist as we call to mind ‘our sins’, not yours! This is our unity, gracious forgiveness. When someone asks to be clothed in most religious orders, there is a question: ‘What do you seek?’ To which the reply is: ‘God’s mercy and yours.’

The joy of the repentant sinner is step into the dawning light of God’s loving judgment and discover oneself utterly loved. Cardinal Basil Hume said that “judgment is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I have never been able to tell”⁸....Many of us have a story, or part of one at any rate, about which we have never been able to speak to anyone. Fear of being misunderstood, inability to understand ourselves, ignorance of the darker side of our hidden lives, or just shame, make it very difficult for many people... What a relief it will be to be able to whisper freely and fully into that merciful and compassionate ear. After all that is what He has always wanted⁹.

On the beach Peter was not yet ready to tell the story of his own need for forgiveness. That day will come. The first account we have of Peter’s denial of Jesus is in Mark’s gospel, which is often called Peter’s memoirs. St Mark knew of Peter’s failure because Peter shared it with his community in Rome. During the Neronian persecution, the Church largely collapsed and Christians betrayed each other. It seems it was then that Peter owned up to his own failure: ‘You betrayed the Lord. So did I!’ The *Instrumentum Laboris* says that often we have demanded that the People of God be accountable to the hierarchy, but the hierarchy must be accountable to the People of God too (75, 76). In the darkest time, Peter gave an account of himself to his people. This turned his shame into joy. This is the shepherd’s ministry of unity, to gather us together so that we ‘dare to say Our Father.’ Clerical elitism is thus not just a lack of humility but a negation of priestly identity. It would like being a gardener who thought his job was to pull up the flowers.

Peter finally, at the end, achieves that greatest act of love. ‘Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends.’ The priest is the minister of the divine friendship. The *Instrumentum Laboris* warns us that priests often speak of ‘a certain fatigue, linked above all to a sense of isolation, loneliness, being cut off from healthy and sustainable relationships, and of being overwhelmed by the demand to provide answers to every need’ (35). The synod looks like one more thing to be done by people who are already busy beyond bearing.

The temptation of the priest is to be a loner, doing everything himself. But this contradicts his vocation, the call to friendship: a friend of God, friendship with for the laity, friendship with those on the edge. friendship with other priests in the presbyterium. St Antony the Great became in the desert the friend of all, because he achieved transparency. Peter Brown wrote,

⁶ Private communication.

⁷ *Credere*,

⁸ Quoting an unnamed priest.

⁹ *To be a Pilgrim*, p.228.



‘He came to radiate such magnetic charm and openness to all, that any stranger who came upon him, surrounded by crowds of disciples, visiting monks, and lay pilgrims, knew which one was the great Antony. He was instantly recognizable as someone whose heart had achieved total transparency to others.’¹⁰

This is why a failure of transparency and accountability corrupts the very heart of the priestly identity. The transparency of Peter the sinner is the foundation of his authority. There can be no cover-up. We are not expected to openly confess all of our sins but at least not to be hypocrites. The People of God are speedy to forgive all else except hypocrisy.

‘Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ Many priests do indeed feel that they do indeed lay down their lives, giving their all, burnt out and exhausted. When an English priest, Sean Connolly, was young, he wrote, ‘Sometimes I feel like a giant sponge, soaking up their difficulties and trials. The problem is that there is often nowhere to squeeze myself out and so it all just builds up and builds up.’¹¹ He has friends who left the priesthood because they wanted to have their lives back. Teachers at the end of week shout out to him, ‘Have a nice weekend.’ A nice weekend for goodness sake! He says: ‘Driving home on a Friday afternoon sometimes, the thought does cross my mind: wouldn’t it be nice to have my own life again.’¹²

Jesus did *not* say, ‘I have come that you may survive and survive abundantly’. Remember those words of St Irenaeus ‘Gloria Dei est homo vivens’; the glory of God is a human being fully alive. Laying down your life does not mean laying down your diary. It is not doing everything by oneself. Cardinal Ratzinger quoted these words at the funeral of John Paul II: ‘Someone else will fasten a belt around you.’ And in this very communion with the suffering Lord, tirelessly and with renewed intensity, he proclaimed the Gospel, the mystery of that love which goes to the end (cf. *Jn* 13:1).’ Laying down your life is an act of love, not endless work. Friendship is learning to be with people and delight in their company. It is shared leisure and laughter, as when Jesus feasted with the prostitutes and tax collectors.

So Peter has the authority of the repentant sinner. But this is not the only authority in this passage. Jesus tells Peter, ‘Follow me.’ Peter looks at the disciple whom Jesus loved and who is *already* following the Lord. ‘What about him?’ Peter asks? ‘What is it to you?’ Jesus replied. The Beloved Disciple has his own authority. He saw the empty tomb and he believed. We have been studying his witness and ‘we know that his testimony is true.’ (v. 24). On the cross Jesus consigns his mother to his care.

Each defers to the authority of the other. Peter recognized the authority of the Beloved Disciple on the night before Jesus dies when he asks him to ask Jesus who will betray him. It is probably the Beloved disciple who had the authority to gain Peter entrance to the High Priest’s house. But the Beloved Disciple defers to Peter too. He runs to the tomb and arrives there first, but he defers to Peter’s seniority and lets him enter first.

The role of shepherds is to be self-effacing and honour the authority of everyone in their care. Everyone has something to offer. Vincent Donovan was a missionary priest who worked with the Masai in East Africa. For a long time, he puzzled as to his priestly role. He discovered that:

¹⁰ Quoted Michael Heher *The Lost Art of Waling on Water*, p.70

¹¹ *Simple Priesthood* London 2001, p.27

¹² *op. cit* p.42



‘he would not be the one in the community who knew the most theology, the theologian. He would not be the preacher or the evangelist of the community. He would not be the prophet. He would not be the most important member in the community, in the sense of being the one who was to make the most important contribution, of which the community might someday be capable. But he would be the focal point of the whole community, the one who would enable the community to act, whether in worship or in service... He would be the sign of their union with the outside, the universal church. He would be their priest.’¹³

The successors of the Beloved Disciple are all of those who eyes are opened to spot the stranger on the beach and declare: ‘It is the Lord.’ Mother Theresa of Calcutta saw the Lord dying on the streets of Kolkata. Mary Magdalene has her authority too, as the one to whom the Risen Lord first spoke, the apostle of apostles. Her tender love opens her to encounter his presence. Thomas has authority because of his passion for the truth. Each defers to the other. Rivalry is enemy of good authority in the Church. A holy hermit in the desert repelled all the attacks of a pack of demons. But Satan came and whispered in his ear: ‘Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria’. The holy hermit explodes in fury. ‘That’s how it is done’ said Satan!

So in this Synod may we discern each other’s authority and defer to it. What new ministries are needed for the Church to recognise their authority and commission them to exercise it? The gospel sheds light on so many who acted with authority in that time. May we do so today. For *today* is the only day we have. *Carpe Diem!*

¹³ Vincent J. Donovan *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* London 1978 p.144f