

EASTER SUNDAY III “C”
MAY 4/5, 2019

Mention “St. Peter’s” and most Catholics immediately conjure up a mental picture of St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican in Rome. St. Peter’s, the largest church in the world, built over the tomb of the Apostle Peter, is the Renaissance and Baroque home to the pope. Architecturally it exudes the power majesty of a triumphant church ruled in former centuries popes who headed it, but also were earthly monarchs of the Papal States; the age of Christendom. St. Peter’s was, and is, a place of grand pageantry, priceless art, and soaring music.

There is another “St. Peter’s” of equal importance. This small church, a little larger than the Burke Chapel here at St. Cecilia’s, was built in, 1934 and is located on the shore of Lake Galilee in the Holy Land. Known as the “Primacy of Peter” its interior is devoid of ornamentation having six plain-colored stained glass windows. The church is constructed, by tradition, around a large flat rock in front of the altar believed to be the spot where Jesus prepared the post-Resurrection breakfast of bread and cooked fish mentioned in today’s Gospel as well as the place where the dialog between Jesus and Peter occurred, concluding with Jesus designating Peter as head of the apostles, and thus head of what would be known as the Church, Peter’s Primacy.

The visual contrast between these two church buildings and the image each conveys could not be greater--one, a symbol of grandeur and power; the other, smallness and humility. Given the recent years revelations of the abuse of authority and position, on the part of some priests and bishops and the subsequent concealment of these crimes against the most vulnerable persons in the Church, God through today’s Gospel especially, is inviting all of us, pope and people, to a more humble understanding and practice of being church.

Shortly after his election, Pope Francis asked by a reporter to describe himself stated simply, “I am a sinner.” Peter in today’s Gospel as Jesus asks him three times “do you love me” surely painfully remembering his three-fold boasting sinful denial of any association with Jesus is brought face-to-face with his sin. Peter—proud, arrogant, outspoken, quick to judge, now no doubt with tears of repentant sorrow, responds with his three-fold, “You know Lord that I love

you.” Peter weak, broken, powerless, humble admission, moves Jesus who hands over to him primacy of place and leadership of his Church—a primacy not of military might, doctrinal inquisition, cozy relationships with the rich and powerful accompanied by the bestowal of favors, but a primacy of self-emptying sacrificial service--“feed my lambs; tend my sheep”—care for the poor, the vulnerable, the forgotten, the “little ones” of the world.

As Jesuit Provincial in Argentina the future Pope Francis was in charge of aspiring young men who were training to also become Jesuits. Part of this training for the aspirant was being sent out on mission. The future pope specifically sent them to the slums, to the poorest of the poor, the forgotten, the peripheries of society. Upon return from their assignment, before inquiring about their work, the future pope would look at the men’s shoes. If their shoes were shiny and unscuffed showing little wear, the future pope knew the men had not gone into the slums but somewhere more comfortable. In turn, they received a firm rebuke before being sent back out again to “feed the lambs and tend the sheep”, search for the lost, bind up the wounded.

What is entrusted to Peter and every pope in an individual and unique way in the Church is also entrusted to all of us. Pope Francis reminds us: “I want a poor church for the poor.” What does that look like? Today Jesus asks Peter, Pope Francis and each of us: ***Do you love me?*** He’s not looking for artful, clean shoes, expressions of devotion of religious pageantry whose fervor ends when the liturgy ends. No, he wants not just our words but especially our concrete actions of love to answer him, Are we angry with someone today? Annoyed? Just cool or uncomfortable with a co-worker, a fellow parishioner, a neighbor...even a close relative? Love them. Serve them. They are the poor. Scuff up the shoes. Don’t allow pride, position, or anything else stand in the way. Jesus never did. Like Peter he loves and forgives us...warts and all. He expects nothing less from us. Through kindness, caring, generosity, patience, forgiveness we feed his lambs, tend his sheep, engage in a primacy of service, self-renouncing love, are revealed as “doing this in memory of me” re-build a great church by becoming a small church, small in the ways of the world, large in the love of God.