

+

## ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU  
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault  
(Fontgombault, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

Amen, amen, I say to thee, when thou wast younger,  
thou didst gird thyself and didst walk where thou wouldst.  
But when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands,  
and another shall gird thee and lead thee  
whither thou wouldst not.  
*(Jn 21:18)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
My dearly beloved Sons,

**T**HESE WORDS ADDRESSED by Jesus to Peter, and reported by St. John just before the last verses of his Gospel, are pronounced on the Sea of Tiberias shore, when the disciples have just come back empty-handed from a night fishing. The Lord has just asked three times the apostle, “Simon, son of John, dost thou truly love Me more than these? ... Simon, son of John, dost thou truly love Me? ... Simon, son of John, dost thou love Me?”<sup>a</sup>

*a. Jn 21:15-17.*

After the third question, Peter is wounded by such an insistent question, which rekindles in him the bitter remembrance of his own threefold betrayal. He answers, “Lord, Thou knowest all things: Thou knowest that I love Thee.” And the answer of Jesus is unexpected, “Feed My sheep.”

Pronounced shortly before the Ascension, these words come as a confirmation of the episode we have read this morning, which had taken place shortly before the Passion. After enquiring on what people said about Him, Jesus had asked the apostles, “But whom do *you* say that I am?”<sup>b</sup>

*b. Mt 16:15.*

*a. v. 16.* Peter, making a confession of faith on behalf of all, had declared, "Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God!"<sup>a</sup>  
And Jesus had rejoined:

*b. vv. 17-18.* Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father who is in heaven. And I say to thee that thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.<sup>b</sup>

In the region of Caesarea Philippi, Peter is thus designated as the rock upon which the Church will be built. Near the Sea of Tiberias, he receives the invitation to be the shepherd of the Lord's sheep.

As noble as Peter's mission may be, it nonetheless requires self-denial. Peter is not the shepherd of his own sheep. He is the shepherd of the Lord's sheep. This applies to whoever exercises authority in the Church.

The words we quoted at the beginning thus receive a new light. When Peter was young, he girded himself. In other words, he organised his projects and went wherever he wanted to go. When he is old, another one will gird him, and lead him where he would not go.

Jesus evokes the past. He foretells the future. Now, what about the present?

Between carrying out his own will in the past, and the prospect of being subjugated by an invincible power in the future, Peter is invited today to open a path for him and his brothers in the steps of Christ, the sole Good Shepherd. His mission is to be a shepherd behind the Shepherd. What will be at stake for him won't be to love himself, or to make others love him, to the point of forgetting Jesus as on the night of the betrayal, or again to take his Lord's place in the eyes of the sheep. For Peter and his successors, the question remains topical: "Peter, do you love Me?" What will therefore be at stake for them will be to follow day after day this Other One, promised by the Lord so as not to leave them orphans.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles illustrates quite clearly how close God is to the affairs of the Church. Peter was

imprisoned. Nothing had been spared to keep in custody this poor Galilee fisherman. Was that already the realisation of the Lord's words, "Another shall gird thee and lead thee whither thou wouldst not"? It would seem so, since Peter is gaoled. But this is not the whole story. The angel of the Lord comes and wakes Peter up, invites him to gird himself, and takes him out of the prison, thus allowing him to go where he wanted to go, and to rejoin the disciples who were in prayer.

On the day the apostle will be martyred, Jesus' words will be realised. The Lord will permit the executioner to carry out his task. Peter is where he would not go. But the encounter with the executioner is but a step on Peter's road, a step towards another encounter, that with his Lord.

Through the events of history, even those seemingly the most adverse, Providence opens up a path. Each man's duty is to walk on it, to make himself docile to the Spirit leading him. The present becomes truly present for those who are present for God, as they make the choice to love Him.

As the Church is now living to the rhythm of a synodal way, the words of Jesus to Peter are to be compared with Pope Francis' teaching during Pentecost Mass:

And the Synod now taking place is — and should be — *a journey in accordance with the Spirit*, not a Parliament for demanding rights and claiming needs in accordance with the agenda of the world, nor an occasion for following wherever the wind is blowing, but the opportunity to be docile to the breath of the Spirit. [...] Let us put the Holy Spirit back at the centre of the Church; otherwise, our hearts will not be consumed by love for Jesus, but by love for ourselves. [...] And let us journey together because, as at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit loves to descend when "all come together"<sup>†</sup>.<sup>a</sup>

† Cf. *Acts* 2:1.

a. Pentecost Homily,  
May 28, 2023.

The Old Testament liked to characterize the Patriarchs as those who walk with God. On the opposite, the Bible doesn't conceal certain examples of disastrous synodality, when man wants to walk on his own and ignores God, such as the first sin, or the episode of the Tower of Babel.

From the earthly paradise on, and still today, God is faithful to His desire to walk with men. Shall we walk with Him?<sup>b</sup>

b. Cf. *Lev* 26:12.

Such a walk can have surprises in store. Let us remember the encounter with his Lord of a certain zealous Pharisee named Saul, on the road to Damascus. Unhorsed, he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?” He answered, “Who art Thou, Lord?” And the voice pursued, “I am Jesus Whom thou persecutest.” The answer of the Apostle reveals that his zeal was intact: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?”<sup>a</sup>

a. *Acts* 9:4-6.

St. Peter and St. Paul’s chequered paths should not make us forget the very simple path of Mary. From her very birth, God was with her, and she remained with Him. May we learn from her how to speak to God, how to walk with Him: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word.”<sup>b</sup>

b. *Lk* 1:38.

Amen.

