

## **The Eighth Apparition - Apparition to Peter and the Apostles [306]**

### **Usual Preparation Prayer.**

**First Prelude: The history:** Here, we can consider the Biblical text that Ignatius proposes Jn 21:1-17, or really we'll consider up to 22. We will remember that after the Resurrection, Peter and a number of the Apostles went out fishing but, after they had caught nothing all night, Jesus appeared to them, and they recognized Him on account of the miraculous catch.

**Second Prelude: The composition of place:** This is a mental representation of the place. Here it will be to see in the imagination Lake Tiberias, "called Gennesaret in ancient times. [The lake], almost oval in shape, measures about seven and one-half miles across at its widest point and is thirteen miles long."<sup>1</sup> The Apostles would have known it well.

**[221] Third Prelude: The petition:** This is to ask for what I desire: to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord.

Ignatius gives us a few simple points to follow:

**First Point.** First: Jesus appears to seven of His Disciples who were fishing, and had taken nothing all night; and spreading the net by His command, "They were not able to draw it out for the multitude of the fishes."

**Second Point.** Second: By this miracle St. John knew Him and said to St. Peter: "It is the Lord!" He cast himself into the sea and came to Christ.

**Third Point.** Third: He gave them to eat part of a fish roasted, and recommended the sheep to St. Peter, having first examined him three times on charity, and says to him: "Feed My sheep!"

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The last chapter of John's Gospel recounts for us another apparition of our Lord to His Apostles, an apparition that is perhaps particularly beautiful and profound for we who are religious, who make our lives professing Christ as Lord and spending our days in the service of our Divine King.

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<sup>1</sup> Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, 5.

We can consider three points: first, the Apostles out fishing, second, Peter's triple confession of His love, and thirdly, the last exchange between Jesus and Peter.

“Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, “We also will come with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, have you caught anything to eat? They answered him, ‘No.’ So he said to them, ‘Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something.’ So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish” (Jn 21:2-6).

We can imagine the cool breeze coming off of the lake, as the sun slowly rose over the horizon. It had been night when the apostles set out in Peter's boat, and it should call our attention that, after such a long time away with Jesus, Peter's boat was just as he had left it, as if he had never given it up entirely. We're presented with the Apostles who, despite the appearances and assurances of Jesus, continue in their disbelief, or who, at the very least, are unable to fathom what the two previous appearances mean. The result is almost comical, and we see this in two things that call our attention: first, Peter's words, “I am going fishing,” and second, the apostles whom John points out. Regarding the first, Peter uses two very specific Greek words; a more literal translation would be “I am going back to being a fisherman.” He makes it clear that he intends to return to his former way of life, as if he could simply walk away from and forget the past three years with Jesus, to cast into oblivion the miracles, the graces, the healings, but also, and perhaps closer to his heart, his denials, his failings, and his falling short. The evangelist shows further how confused the Apostles are by first pointing out that with Peter are Thomas called Didymus and Nathanael from Cana in Galilee. Tradition holds that Thomas was an architect or at least a builder, and while no profession is recorded for Nathanael, and experts aren't sure exactly where the town of Cana was located, all the possible locations place it miles from the sea. In other words, Thomas and Nathanael were two very unlikely candidates for a life of fishing, and yet John lists them first, as though they were the most eager to follow Peter.

These two points can also be seen in our lives. At times we can feel like we simply want to walk away, to forget the difficulties and, yes, our failings too. We might be convinced that the “grass is greener on the other side,” that it's easier

somewhere else, or doing something else. More often than not, however, it's not that dramatic; we just want to let up in some part of our lives, to avoid giving everything to Jesus and to instead take some shortcut. Yet, no matter what we do, no matter how we try to get away from God, the memory of those graces, and His Mercy, remain. To try to do something other than love God entirely is, for the religious, like sending an architect out fishing: it doesn't make sense, because it goes against who we are and what we are called to be.

Fortunately for us, God is very merciful and very patient, and if we constantly turn to Him in prayer and the sacraments, He comes to find us. This is what He does in Peter's case. Although the events recalled in the second part of the Gospel seem just like those of Lk 5:1-11, when Peter was first called, something is different; some words are missing. When told to lower the nets on the other side of the boat, this time, at the end of John's Gospel, Peter doesn't give a reply; he simply obeys.

We have to understand for a moment how difficult and odd that first command from Jesus was for a fisherman. After all, Peter was a fisherman; he knew how to fish, and some strange figure on the shore couldn't change what hundreds, if not thousands, of years of fishing experience had proven. There are at least three reasons why Peter shouldn't have listened to Christ. First, Peter was the fisherman, and Christ a carpenter. Secondly, every fisherman knows the best time for fishing is at night, not during the day. Thirdly, throwing the net on the wrong side of the boat is to be set up for disaster if the nets get caught or tangled. Peter knows that the command is a strange one, and while he obeys, he only does so halfheartedly: in Luke's account, in the Greek, Jesus asks Peter to lower the *nets*. Peter replies that he will lower *a net*, not several, but one. Jesus, though, takes what he's given, and works with what He has. Perhaps recalling this, after the Resurrection, He only asks Peter to *lower a single net*, because that's where his faith is at.

Here, in John's Gospel, the point is not that the dialogue is changed, but that Peter has changed. Jesus doesn't let him walk away from his calling instead meets the Rock where he is at. Jesus waits, with His mercy, to encourage Peter in his calling. We see this beautifully in another particular detail: Jesus is waiting with a charcoal fire. The word for the fire in Greek is very specific, ἀνθρακιά (anthrakia) and it is found only in two places in the entire New Testament: here, and in Jn 18:18, when Peter warms himself by the fire and denies Christ three times. Jesus brings that fire, not to condemn Peter for his failings, but to show His love for the prince of the Apostles in spite of them.

In this fourth week, Saint Ignatius asks us to consider “the office of consoler that Christ our Lord exercises, and compare it with the way in which friends are wont to console each other.” Could anything be gentler, or more full of compassion, than the way that Jesus prepares a feast on the shore? There’s bread, warmth, fish, companionship . . . Jesus has everything prepared for them. Although He was certainly hurt by Peter’s denial, He comes quickly to show His love and forgiveness. Even then, Christ doesn’t force the issue; He waits until after they had shared a meal.

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” [Jesus] said to him, “Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, ‘Follow me.’”

Because Peter had denied Our Lord three times, Our Blessed Lord asked him three times if he loved Him. There are two things we can notice here: first, that Jesus calls Peter “Simon, son of John,” and not “Peter,” and second, the dialogue itself.

We can appreciate the fact that Jesus calls Peter by his old name. “Simon, son of John.” Within each of us, that struggle between the greatness of our call, and the weaknesses and failings of our old nature, the “old man,” rages incessantly. We could call it the struggle between “Simon” and “Peter.” Yet, Christ does not leave us alone in our struggle; again, He comes to meet Peter where he is at.

Slowly but surely, Peter came to dominate over Simon. In the New Testament, after Pentecost there’s less and less mention of Simon, and it’s only mentioned for a particular reason. For instance, Cornelius is told to look for “Simon, who is surnamed Peter” in Acts 10:5, since outsiders would know him by

one name, Christians by another. At the Council of Jerusalem James calls him “Simon” because of their long friendship but, elsewhere, he is simply Peter. That impulsive daring has become steadfast, bridled courage. The only time we see the name Simon is in his last epistle, when he repeats the name himself, to recall humbly his old, unsanctified self.<sup>2</sup> The turning point came when, on the shore, he surrendered himself to Christ.

Secondly, the dialogue itself, the words that are used, reveals Christ’s profound love and compassion.

The most standout word in the dialogue is this word, ‘love.’ We have only one word in English for “love,” which is the source of confusions. The Greeks had at least three words for love — two of them as used in the Gospel. One Greek word for love is *philia*, which means a natural human love and affection; it’s rarely used in the Gospels. The other is *agape*, which means a sacrificial love, the highest love, a supernatural love. It implies that the person loving knows the preciousness, the value, of the beloved.

The word that Christ uses is not the same one that Peter replies with: in the first two questions, Jesus uses the word *agape*, and Peter replies with *philia*. The third time, both Christ and Peter use *philia*. Peter once presumed the greatness of his love, telling His master the night of the Last Supper that even though everyone else might abandon Him, he would not.

Peter had already been made the “rock of the Church”: now Our Lord commissions him further – to feed His lambs and feed His sheep. Before doing that, He asked if he loved: “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” In challenging Peter, the Lord gave him the opportunity of three times confessing and proclaiming His divinity after three times denying it. In the first question, the Lord challenges the *superiority* of Peter’s love (*agape*); in the second, He challenged if Peter had any love at all (*agape*); in the third question, the Lord challenged even his affection (*philia*). This was the most searching question of all, and it pierced the heart of Peter and made him sad, but the Lord wounds only that He may heal. After each of the triple confessions of Peter came the commission to ‘feed My lambs and feed My sheep’: that is to say, to minister spiritual nourishment to His people and to the young.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fulton Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own*, chapter “The Priest as Simon and Peter.” See also “The Return to Divine Favor,” and *Life of Christ*, chapter “Love as the Condition of Authority.”

In the last exchange, Christ Himself uses Peter's *philia*; He scales down His demands on Peter. He was no longer calling for the victim kind of love for which He had first asked. It is as if Our Lord were putting His hands under that poor, weak, fragile love of Peter, just as He in fact starts with our poor, weak, human love as the beginning of a rich apostolate. The Lord asked for a love of devotion, and all He got was a love of emotion. But even that He does not reject. It's not enough, He says, but it's enough to start.

Also to note are the words that Peter uses when he says, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." In the Greek, the word which Peter used when he said that Our Lord knew all things implied a knowledge by Divine Vision. When Peter said that the Lord knew that he loved Him, the Greek word meant only knowledge by direct observation. Peter has walked down the ladder of humility, for Christ truly knows from direct experience how Peter loves.

In our lives, too, Christ comes to us. Fr. Jacques Philippe puts it this way. He writes: "God is 'realistic.' His grace does not operate on our imaginings, ideals, or dreams. It works on reality, the specific, concrete elements of our lives. Even if the fabric of our everyday lives doesn't look very glorious to us, only there can we be touched by God's grace. The person God loves with the tenderness of a Father . . . is not the person we'd have liked to be or ought to be. It's the person we are. God doesn't love 'ideal persons' or 'virtual beings.' He loves actual, real people. . . . A great deal of time can be wasted in the spiritual life complaining that we are not like this or not like that, lamenting this defect or that limitation, imagining all the good we could do if, instead of being the way we are, we were less defective, more gifted with this or that quality or virtue, and so on. Here is a waste of time and energy that merely impedes the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. What often blocks the action of God's grace in our lives is less our sins or failings, than it is our failure to accept our own weaknesses. . . . The Holy Spirit never acts unless we freely cooperate. We must accept ourselves just as we are, if the Holy Spirit is to change us for the better."<sup>3</sup>

At this point, Jesus could have asked Peter anything in the world. "Peter, do you promise not to drop the ball again?" "Peter, do you promise that you will be more humble and not trust in yourself so much?" or even "I told you so." But Christ doesn't. The only thing He asks is if Peter loves Him, because if He has Peter's love, He has everything else. He can't ask Peter not to fail, because he will. He can't ask Peter to never mess up, because that's part of the human condition. All He asks is for His love.

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<sup>3</sup> *Interior Freedom*, 32-33.

The condition of Peter's vocation, and of every vocation, is that love of Christ. Jesus will provide everything else Peter needs, and that we need, provide He has the one thing He can't make us do: love Him with our whole hearts.

There is, finally, a beautiful line at the end, one that often gets past over: "When Peter saw [John, the disciple whom Jesus loved], he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'What if I want him to remain until I come? What concern is it of yours? You follow me.'"

Sometimes we get caught up on who is doing what, who decides to follow, and who decides to walk away. You follow Me. You follow Me.

**Colloquy:** Close with a colloquy, or colloquies, as the circumstances suggest, and at the end say the *Our Father*.

We can end with a colloquy to our Lord, rejoicing in how much He came to comfort Peter, despite his failings, and ask that we might love Him with our whole hearts, sharing in the joy of the Risen Lord who comes, not to punish us for our failings, but to lift us up, and to draw us closer to His Sacred Heart.