

Third Sunday of Easter

Year C, 2025

Acts 5:27-32, 40-41 Rev 5:11-14
Ps 30 Jn 21:1-19

Peter and Jesus: a reminiscence on papal transitions

The gospels reveal a deep and undeniable connection between Jesus and Peter. Among all his disciples, Jesus chose twelve, the Apostles. Among the Apostles, there was a select group of three who often accompanied Jesus in the most intimate moments of his prayer: Peter, James, and John. And among these three, one stands out in particular, Peter. And this is true across all four gospels.

In today's gospel, we witness the connection, the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Jesus, having died and risen from the dead, has already appeared twice to his disciples, both times in the upper room, where the doors were locked and where they huddled in fear. Now, the disciples have left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee. They have not yet received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and so they are still confused, stunned, still trying to understand what will happen now that their Master, once dead and now surely alive, appears to them from time to time. They don't know what to do, and so they naturally fill their time with things that are familiar to them.

And so Peter, a fisherman, decides: "I am going fishing." And with him are six others: Thomas, Nathanel, brothers James and John, and two other disciples. A miraculous catch of fish follows, with the realization that it is the Lord who is calling out to them. A rush to the

shore. A joyous reunion. A breakfast meal of fish and bread, broken and distributed by Jesus, with clear eucharistic overtones.

And then when they are full, Jesus speaks to Peter, calling him by name. But Jesus calls Peter not by the name he had given him, but by the name given him at birth: "Simon, son of John." Three times Jesus addresses him by name, Simon, son of John. Three times Jesus asks him if he loves him. Three times Peter answers yes: "yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And three times Jesus gives Simon Peter a charge: feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.

In this exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus, the Church has seen the role of the successor of Peter, who is the pope, as the chief shepherd of the flock of Christ. As the Bishop of Rome, the pope is the successor of Peter, who was Rome's first bishop, and whose role is to keep the flock together by strengthening his brothers, specifically the other apostles, the bishops, and by feeding the flock of Christ with the word of truth, which is the gospel, and with the bread of life, which is the holy Eucharist.

Since Pope Francis died on Easter Monday, April 21, the Church has been without her Peter, her chief shepherd. On Wednesday of this coming week, the cardinals of the Church, gathered in Rome, will begin the solemn conclave to choose a successor to Peter, who will become pope. Of the 252 cardinals alive today, only 135 may enter the conclave, since only cardinals under 80 years of age at time that

the Apostolic See becomes vacant (by the death or resignation of a pope) are eligible to vote.

Once the cardinals enter the conclave, they begin voting, in a process that anyone with a television has surely already learned a lot about. But one question keeps coming to me about this process: who's on the list of those nominated to be pope? This is a misconception, likely based on the lists of the so-called *papabili*, those cardinals considered as possible frontrunners to be elected pope. These lists are compiled by historians, theologians, journalists, Vatican-watchers, and nowadays anybody with a social media account. They are useful in that through them we can learn about the various cardinals, who come from nearly every continent. But they are also completely and totally unofficial. When the cardinals vote, there is no list of names on their ballots. There are no official candidates "running" for pope. Any one of the men in the room could be elected pope. Each cardinal, on a blank ballot, will write the name of the man who he believes could worthily fill the role of Peter in the Church. As Peter loved Jesus, so the man who would be elected pope must love Jesus. As Peter would lay down his life for Jesus, so the new pope. As Peter remained faithful to the risen Lord, so the new pope. As Peter was charged to feed the Lord's flock, so must the new pope.

The cardinals will vote until one candidate receives at least two-thirds of the votes, a supermajority. One vote is taken on the first day, and then four votes a day until a pope is chosen. After a few days with no definitive vote, they take a break for a day, and then vote for

another few rounds, take a break, and so on. You can find all the details you want by listening to the commentators or reading about it online. It's interesting and fascinating. How long will the conclave last? No one knows. I would imagine that within four or five days, possibly by next Sunday, a new pope will be elected. And after the conclave, be skeptical of any reports as to what went on in the conclave. The cardinals are sworn to secrecy about how they voted or about the discussions they had among themselves concerning the selection of the new pope.

Once elected, the new pope will be announced by the most senior cardinal-deacon, who happens to be my former boss when I worked in Rome, Cardinal Dominique Mamberti, who is French. If someone other than Cardinal Mamberti walks out to announce the new pope, we'll immediately know that he was elected. Otherwise, we'll have to wait until he announces it. Which he will do in Latin.

It's been twenty years since the Church has experienced the death and election of a pope. Pope Benedict's resignation in 2013 changed the customary order of things. But in April 2005, Pope John Paul II died and Pope Benedict was elected. I was there for those great events, in seminary, as a second-year theology student. One of the great privileges of studying for the priesthood in Rome is that one gets an up-close experience of being near Peter, both the historical apostle, who died very near and over whose burial place the Vatican was build, and the successor to Peter, the pope.

I remember well the day on which Pope John Paul II died. Late that afternoon, alone, I walked from the American seminary to St Peter's Square in the Vatican – it is a short walk – to pray a rosary for the dying pope. As I walked in the Square, there was a somber and quiet mood among the people gathered here and there in little pockets. I remember a group of young people from Spain, sitting together on the pavement, quietly singing spiritual songs as one of them played the guitar, singing and praying for the pope whom they loved and admired. There were small groups of nuns in the piazza, and a few tourists who happened to be there wandering about. It was a typical evening in St Peter's Square, though, as I said, the mood was reserved and prayerful.

After praying my rosary for Pope John Paul II, I went back up to my room in the seminary and later that evening placed a phone call to my parents. The window in my small seminary room, wide open to let in the fresh spring air, overlooked the dome of St Peter's Basilica. As I was on the phone with my mom, the bells of St Peter's began to toll. The funeral toll. Long, slow, deep tolls of the bell. I brought the receiver of the phone to my window and asked my mom, "Listen. Can you hear that? What do you hear?" "I hear bells," she said. I told her, "That means the pope just died."

Nearly four million people attended John Paul II's funeral, and the city of Rome, already full of pilgrims and tourists, was overrun for weeks. But the life of a seminary student – indeed, life in Rome – doesn't stop because a pope dies. The rhythm of life changes for a

few weeks, but ordinary, everyday life has to go on. I had to go to classes, as we were in the middle of the semester and had just come back from the Easter break.

Next came the election of Pope Benedict. We seminarians went to class and attended our responsibilities at the seminary as usual, though we may have skipped a class or two to be present in St Peter's Square to witness the scheduled smoke coming from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. Three times black smoke went up. No pope. On the fourth ballot, white smoke! A new pope!

I was there, down in the Piazza, just behind the Egyptian obelisk in the center, with a small group of fellow seminarians. An American priest who lived at our seminary and worked in the Vatican was returning home from his office and stopped to be with us. He is now the Bishop of Toledo in Ohio. Together, our little group prayed a rosary for the new pope, whose name, though, we still did not know. In the meantime, rivers of people were streaming into the Square. I saw eighty-year-old nuns hike up their habits and swing sharp elbows to claw through the crush of people. It was holy chaos. People were abandoning their cars in the middle of the streets and running to St Peter's. Roman traffic, already crazy, just ground to a halt around the Vatican.

We had to wait about an hour until it was announced: *Habemus papam*. We have a pope. And when the senior cardinal deacon proclaimed that it was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the crowd went

absolutely wild with joy. Everyone in Rome knew Cardinal Ratzinger, admired him: the Roman people, the priests, the nuns. It was the single most electric moment I have every experienced, with tens of thousands of people crowded into the Vatican Square that moment to rejoice, to pray, to cheer, to be glad. We have a pope. After the long reign of the beloved John Paul II, after our sorrow at his death, we had a pope again.

Currently there are two seminarians of Lafayette and one priest of Lafayette living in Rome. Theirs, I imagine, will be an experience similar to mine. Different, to be sure, since the times and persons involved are quite different. But similar in that they will experience up close and personal this great moment in the life of the Church, when, having mourned the death of one pope, a new one is chosen, a successor to the apostle Peter. *Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia*. Where Peter is, there is the Church. An expression attributed to the great Church Father St Ambrose, to signify that the Pope, as Peter, is the visible sign of the Church's unity: one faith, one flock, under one supreme shepherd.

To be pope, a man must be elected by two-thirds of the cardinals who are present to choose him. And then, he will be asked if he accepts. The man who receives at the required number of votes is not pope until his acceptance is asked and answered. *Accepto*. I accept. At that moment, he is pope. At that moment, symbolically and spiritually, he becomes Peter, whom the Lord Jesus asked three times, *do you love*

me? And three times he answered yes. And three times he was given the charge to tend and feed the flock of Christ.

What a moment! What a responsibility! What a grace!

As faithful members of the flock of Christ, let us pray for the new Peter, as yet unknown to us, but surely known to God, soon to be chosen by the cardinals and revealed to the Church. We must now pledge ourselves to be loyal children of the Church, who await their Holy Father, who will pray for and support him so that he may never fail or falter, but may be a faithful and true servant, one who, like Peter in the gospel, responds obediently and with love to Jesus when he tells him: "Follow me."