

Bishop's reflection

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Peter might be one step ahead of the other Apostles, but he is still a long way from understanding who Jesus is and what he came to do. How true that is of many of us as Christians; though we might know that Christ is Lord and only Begotten Son of God, such knowledge does not have any real meaning – after all, the Devil and his minions possess this same knowledge, unless it becomes the basis of our lives.

Like Peter, it is the path of suffering that derails us. Peter cannot accept that the Christ of God must suffer. Though many Christians have come to intellectually understand that Christ's suffering was necessary and salvific, we have a hard time accepting the necessary suffering that comes into our own lives, and how it plays a necessary part in the way that Christ saves us. We are more prone to reject some forms of suffering in our lives – take the present arguments for assisted suicide as an example, than to pray with Jesus in our own Gardens of Gethsemane – “Take this cup away from me, but not my will, but yours be done”, and ask God to sustain us in our hour of greatest need.

Jesus' words, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are thinking not as God does, but as humans do”, reveal the seductive nature of Peter's words and the effect Peter's rebuke has on Jesus. Just as Peter is able to convey the words of the Father on his lips, by proclaiming Jesus' true identity, so he is able to convey the insidious words of the enemy, that present a stumbling block in Jesus' path and a stumbling block to faith in what is essentially the path to salvation.

This is a stark contrast with St. Joseph, whose year we celebrate on this 150th anniversary of being named Patron Saint of the Universal Catholic Church. Joseph, like Mary, is formed in the way of the cross from the very beginning of his calling. By contrasting two opposing paths, the one Joseph resolves to take and the one God's Angel reveals in a dream, Joseph selects the path that involves the greater faith, uncertainty and suffering. Together with Mary, and the Prophets before them, Joseph foreshadows the path of redemptive suffering that is fully accomplished in Christ.

Peter, at this point in the Gospel, like many of us, isn't there yet. He still needs to be told not to tell anyone (how can we apply this timely advice to the many opinions we hold from the scantest study or information?) and to be rebuked before others, as an example to us all.

Peter needs to be led to the foot of the cross, as Christ often leads us, while publicly denying Christ and his work, and not understanding how anything good can come of it. Peter, like many of us, needs to confront his fear of the crowds, behind locked doors with the other Apostles, with his feelings of betrayal and failure, his faith and hope battered and compromised. It is only in this way that Peter's faith is formed and tested, like gold in a red hot furnace, a faith that is crowned by his eventual martyrdom.

The Pastoral Letter of James, source for our Second Reading, reveals this same dynamic. James is concerned about those Christians whose faith is more theory and words than works and action. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead”, he says. What good is it to believe something and not to live by it? Faith is made known through works -- and the sufferings that bring it to perfection.