

## "I have been Peter"

Brothers and Sisters, today I humbly offer you a glimpse into my heart as I prepare for our Cenacle tonight, week 41.

I always appreciate the value of preparation when I protect a small amount of time to preread the week's texts. This week, all were very powerful, but the Gospel reading in the Cenacle today brought me to tears. Today we read a story we likely have heard many times: the story of Peter's denial of Christ (Matthew 26:33-34 and 69-75).

I've heard it at least annually. Perhaps in the past, it has been somewhat overtaken by the rest of the image that is painted in the Gospel about Our Lord's passion and suffering. It is easy to move on too quickly from 'the denial' because what follows is even more intense and powerful. But today the simple story of Peter's denial is isolated and read on its own. When I read it slowly, it truly broke my heart.

In order to share with you the depth of my feelings I had to be sure I was using the right word. A clear text found online clarified things for me. "Empathy is the ability to experience the feelings of another person. **Empathy goes beyond sympathy**, which is caring and understanding for the suffering of others. Both words are used similarly and often interchangeably (incorrectly so) but differ subtly in their emotional meaning."

I did not just feel sympathy, I felt empathy for Peter. Deeply and painfully, I felt empathy.

I am often empathetic, sometimes to the point that I withdraw socially because I can ache from the sorrow of others. Perhaps as a result of that tendency, I feel a strong connection to Our Lady of Lourdes and I cherish serving the sick, grieving, elderly, dying, and shut-in because they not only flourish with empathy but I would go so far as to say they require it.

I wish that I could say that I felt sorrow and cried for Peter's denial because I am just empathetic and could easily feel his pain, but no, I would be remiss to pretend that I sat in a

comfortable, lofty position of faith when I felt his sorrow. The truth is that I cried because **I have been Peter**. I have forsaken Our Lord. I have turned my back or not responded, pretending I didn't hear when I felt uncomfortable with a situation that didn't align with my faith. I might not have expressly denied Him in words when pressured by others, but I have done what amounts to that very thing through silence and a lack of courage.

"...through what I have done and what I have failed to do."

Oh, how it ached to recognize myself in that confident "I will never forsake you" and then to see my reflection in the "I know not of whom you speak."

If any of this made you wince or cringe because you recognized it too, do not despair!

In the Diary reading for today (1488), we were generously lifted out of the conviction to which we sentenced ourselves; we are reminded that He is not pleased with our self-imposed misery. "...the greatest obstacles to holiness are discouragement and an exaggerated anxiety. These will deprive you of the ability to practice virtue." So true. When trapped in a moment disliking oneself, we are prone to abandoning or

forgetting all of the rest of the graces which bring us closer to virtue. In addition, when obsessing about a shortcoming or failure, we are unintentionally snubbing our nose at the ever-present promise of Reconciliation through His Mercy. "Remember, I did not allot only a certain number of pardons." Whew!

In case we just think that this is only a message of soft love from Our Lord, don't overlook this little caution in 1488: "Sensitiveness and discouragement are the fruits of self-love." Ouch. Although our empathy for Peter (or our own strong self-evaluation) is useful to the Christian life and important for a healthy course correction from time to time, we must not let it get out of control. With prayer and humility we must feel the feeling of empathy for another or perhaps disappointment in ourself but we must:

- quickly take that feeling and offer it to Our Lord as an acknowledgement that we realize our short-coming AND
- count on His unfailing Love, begging for his forgiveness AND
- learn from that weakness to strengthen the weak muscle, considering that this must be part of a lesson we are meant to learn. It may even be part of our cross to bear.

Brothers and sisters, life's crosses are not all about us - they are all about Him. The more we can remove ourself from that reflection, the more we will see Jesus in the mirror.

Blessings and love to you all.

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