

Today, we celebrate the Memorial of the Chair of Saint Peter the Apostle. Our biblical foundation for recognizing Peter as the first leader of the church comes from the Gospel of Mathew. "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). In the native language of Jesus, Peter translates to rock. So another translation of this verse is: "You are the Rock and upon this rock I will build my church." For Jesus, "church means the community that he will gather and that, like a building, will have Peter as its solid foundation." Jesus chose one of the twelve to lead the early church. For some two thousand years, we have recognized Peter and his successors as head of the Roman Catholic Church. "The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. ... The church of Jesus ... will not be overcome by the power of death" (Note to Mt 16:18).

Just as we celebrate our birth each year with the commemoration of our birthday, Christians in the early church celebrated their birth into the church, especially in the East. The anniversary of one's Baptism was a day to take note of. "On that day, each one renewed his baptismal vows and gave thanks to God for his heavenly adoption" (Ibreviary, Feb 22). Likewise, bishops celebrated the anniversary of their ordination with a recommitment to serve the faithful and follow in the footsteps of Christ. With the Memorial of the Chair of Saint Peter, we commemorate the beginning of Peter's ministry in Rome.

We know from the Gospel of John, that the risen Jesus encountered Peter in a very profound way on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias after the apostles had fished all night but caught nothing. Jesus encouraged them to cast their nets one more time and they filled them with 153 fish. A sign that with Jesus's help the church would grow larger than they could imagine. "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" (Jn 21:15). As with the earlier verse from Matthew, Jesus is reconfirming that he has chosen Peter to lead the Church. "The First Vatican Council cited these verses (21:15-17) in defining that Jesus after his resurrection gave Peter the jurisdiction of supreme shepherd and ruler over the whole flock" (Biblical footnote).

Peter pledges his love to God and promises to shepherd the church by taking care of the flock that the Lord will entrust to him. And Peter, who has not always shown the most courage is reassured by our Lord that he will remain steadfast in his faith. "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" (Jn 21:18). Peter who had denied Christ three times on Good Friday, three decades hence will follow Jesus and the way of the cross ... being crucified upside down in Rome.

Peter's early responsibilities for the Church began in Jerusalem. With this commission by Jesus and the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter embraced the challenges of leadership and boldly proclaimed the good news. On Pentecost, Peter testified that Jesus is the Messiah, the living Son of God and he challenged the crowd to follow Jesus. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit ... Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day" (Acts 2:38-41).

With a new church to build, the chair of Peter moved with him from one place to another. From Jerusalem, he moved to Antioch about three years later. Antioch was an influential city and "the capital of the East ... where the faith so early took such deep roots as to give birth there to the name of Christians" (Ibreviary). From this one city, Peter influenced three major cultures, Hebrews, the Greeks and the Latins. After seven years in Antioch with the church firmly established there, Peter moved to Rome, an even more influential city in its day. We do not know

the exact date that Peter died, but we commemorate it on the 22nd of February. More importantly, we associate this date with his taking pastoral responsibility of the Church of Rome. After 25 years of feeding the flock and tending to the sheep in Rome, Peter passed on the torch so that others would carry on in the tradition of Jesus Christ.

In his era, Peter encouraged the priests to witness to the sufferings of Christ, tend to the flock of God, and set a worthy example. By our baptismal calling, we to are called to be witnesses to the sufferings of Christ, care for those around us with the love of God and be worthy examples of the Christian faith.