



Reflections on
the 2000-year
old legacy the new pope
will inherit

As I write, the See of Peter is vacant; and we await the election of a new pope. Let me share some reflections on the 2000-year-old legacy he will inherit.

Imagine that you were reading the New Testament for the first time. You could not help but notice one particularly prominent personality: Peter the Apostle. He is mentioned by name (as “Simon,” “Peter,” “Simon Peter,” or “Cephas”) a total of 195 times—far more often than any other figure. St. John comes next (29 times), followed by St. James (19 times). Surely such a striking contrast cannot be accidental. The Holy Spirit Who inspired the Scriptures means for us to pay attention to Peter.

Since I came across these figures some years ago, I have read the New Testament differently. I began to notice how frequently Peter appears and to wonder about the reasons that might underlie the mention of his name. “Why Peter?” I found myself asking; “why not one of the other disciples?” Why did Jesus choose *Peter’s* boat to teach from? Why did He heal *Peter’s* mother-in-law at the start of his mission? Why did He call *Peter* to walk to him on the roaring sea? Similar questions now come to mind in the 192 other passages where the Apostle’s name occurs.

You will not have trouble finding it in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter

takes the lead early on when he calls the other apostles to elect Judas’ successor. On Pentecost it is Peter, “standing with the eleven,” who proclaims the Resurrection to the crowd in Jerusalem. When the apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin for evangelizing, it is Peter who speaks in their defense. To Peter it is revealed in a vision that God wills the Gentiles to enter the Church, and it is Peter who welcomes and defends them when they do. We begin to understand why the recently-converted Paul was drawn to Jerusalem to visit Peter and spend fifteen days with him (Galatians 1:18).

On the rock of Peter’s confession of faith in Him, Jesus laid the foundation of His Church’s unity through time. It is a unity built up by the Eucharist, and it exists simultaneously on several overlapping, interpenetrating levels. A pastor is responsible for the Eucharistic unity of his parish; a bishop, for the Eucharistic unity of the parishes of his diocese. But the pope, Peter’s successor, bears responsibility for the Eucharistic unity of all the bishops—that is, the unity of the Universal Church. Through Peter’s union in faith with the bishops and their union in faith with him, Catholics throughout the world live in communion with one another in the faith handed down from the Apostles.

For Jesus prayed to the Father that “they *all* may be one.” And He entrusted the mission of unity to Peter and his successors. True to the Lord’s promise, in two thousand years the gates of hell have not prevailed against it. Miraculously, the ministry of Peter continues to keep the Church together in faith, and this month we are fortunate to witness its transmission in time.