

**Study 19: First Peter...Words of Encouragement**

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**Background.** The canon of Scripture contains two letters attributed to St. Peter. It is assumed that he wrote the first from Rome [see Peter's use of "Babylon" as a code name for Rome in 1 Pet 5:13], probably sometime between 63 and 65 A.D. Although Peter makes no explicit reference to the persecution unleashed by Emperor Nero in late 64, it is by no means certain that he wrote before this date. He could well have written it during the early phases of this persecution. The letter is written in correct, even elegant Greek, the Greek of Silvanus [See 1 Pet 5:12], who is likely the Silas we encounter in Acts 15:22 when he was Paul's companion.

**The First Encyclical.**

This first of all papal encyclicals was directed to the churches of Asia Minor (present day Turkey), as can be seen by the local churches mentioned in 1 Pet 1:1. These Christians were largely Gentiles who had been evangelized mainly by St. Paul. Peter wrote at the start of a time of grave crisis in the history of the infant Church. Persecution had probably already begun in Rome. The Emperor Nero attempted to make the Christians scapegoats for the burning of the city, which all evidence indicates he had instigated. Peter, now in Rome, had received news of the martyrdom of James, Bishop of Jerusalem. The death of James dramatically highlighted a change in the relationship of the young Church to both the Empire and the Synagogue. The Christian Faith was now completely separated from the community of Israel and was now experiencing the beginning of a bloody persecution from an empire bent on destroying it.

**The First Letter of Peter.**

In the midst of these discouraging circumstances Peter, the first Pope, well aware that persecution would not be confined to Rome's city limits, but would undoubtedly spread throughout the Empire, addresses a letter of encouragement to the Christians of Asia Minor. Peter probably expected the Emperor to order local authorities across the Empire to institute similar persecutions, or that these locals, in order to curry favor with Rome, would simply follow Nero's example. Peter, therefore, in an effort to prepare these Christian communities for the storm which might soon break right over them, reminds them of their Baptism. He first calls to mind the liturgy of the Baptismal ceremony. Then, in a way that relates to their present circumstances, he reminds them that through Baptism they are united with Christ, who brought them redemption through His suffering and death. In a very real way they will share Christ's risen glory only by passing with Him through the valley of the shadow of death.

This letter and its practical message is a faithful reflection of the catechesis of apostolic times. Rich in content, it is written in a simple style, full of energy and supernatural warmth, as one would expect of preaching in those early days of the Church.

**Now open your Bible** and read the First Letter of St. Peter. As you read, you might want to make the following notations in the margin next to each part of Peter's Letter:

- ✠ "Greeting" – next to 1 Pet 1:1-5
- ✠ "Roman Baptismal Liturgy" – next to 1 Pet 1:6-25
- ✠ "Baptismal Homily of St. Peter" – next to 1 Pet 2:1 – 4:11
- ✠ "Letter Proper: Practical Application" – next to 1 Pet 4:12 – 5:11
- ✠ "Conclusion" – next to 1 Pet 5:12-14

**Behind the Words.** Now let's look at some key concepts and passages in Peter's First Letter.

✠ "...who in His great mercy gave us a new birth." [See 1 Pet 1:1-25]

**1 Pet 1:3-5.** The administration of the sacrament of Baptism usually took place at the great Easter Vigil service. The Baptismal ceremonies began with the singing of a hymn which Peter has preserved for us in three lines. It sums up beautifully the content of the Christian's faith and the object of his

hope. We are told by the Early Church Fathers and others that the Christian's of Rome often sang as they entered the arena to be sacrificed. What more appropriate hymn could they have sung than this?

**1 Pet 1:6-25.** The celebrant now addresses the candidates for Baptism, reminding them of the present condition on the threshold of the "new birth." In the modern Baptismal rite the minister still asks the catechumen: "What do you ask of God's Church?" and the catechumen replies, "Faith." This ancient liturgy also emphasizes that it is faith which characterizes the followers of Christ. In the early Church the ordinary minister of the sacrament was the bishop, and so as Peter here recreates the ceremony, he is recalling the many times when he, as the Bishop of Rome, presided at the Baptismal Liturgy.

Peter continues (1 Pet 1:10-12) to remind the catechumens that their faith is based upon the prophets and the Good News of salvation, the Gospel. We have now reached the last few moments before the actual administration of the sacrament and St. Peter calls upon the catechumens to ready themselves for a fruitful reception of the sacrament (1 Pet 1:13-20). He calls for a more holy Christian life, the kind one would expect from "obedient children" [1 Pet 1:14], who have been ransomed with the precious Blood of Christ [1 Pet 1:16]. This is what God, who is the "holy" One [1 Pet 1:16], expects of them; and He will judge them according to the degree of holiness they have attained. Peter then invites them to come forward to the Baptismal pool (1 Pet 1:21). Here there is a pause as the catechumens go down into the waters of the Baptismal pool, then rise up from the waters as members of Christ's Body. This is followed by a final exhortation, and then the newly baptized for the first time participate in the entire Mass and receive the Eucharist.

✠ **"...for you have tasted that the Lord is good." [See 1 Peter 2:1-4:11]**

These chapters probably represent one of the homilies which Peter had actually preached at the conclusion of the Baptismal ceremonies of the Easter Vigil. He places it here to bring out the meaning of the events which he had just related to the Christians of Asia Minor, something which they had experienced when they embraced the faith. Peter first alludes to the practice of giving the newly baptized Christians a taste of milk to symbolize their spiritual innocence (1 Pet 2:2) and their recent reception of the Eucharist (1 Pet 2:3). He then goes on to describe the significance of their union with Christ and their newfound dignity (1 Pet 2:4-10).

Peter also tells them that their holiness is tested by the quality of that brotherly love which people born into the life of grace should have. They should be constantly growing in this love, realizing that they are "living stones" [1 Pet 2:5] built on Christ, who is the cornerstone, becoming a spiritual temple and a holy priesthood [1 Pet 2:6, 9]. This union with Jesus Christ gives them a share in His priestly office, to offer spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humanity. *The laity, therefore, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are called and prepared to do God's work on earth so that even richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them.*

This entire passage is filled with allusions and quotations from the Old Testament, a fact that highlights the unity of Sacred Scripture and the reality of the Old Testament being fulfilled in the New. The remainder of this section is devoted to various counsels for living the Christian life.

**[Note: It might be a valuable exercise to take the time to trace each of Peter's references and allusions to their Old Testament sources. For assistance with this, check the footnotes in your Bible.]**

✠ **"Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you." [See 1 Pet 4:12-5:11]**

At this point Peter directly addresses the Christians of Asia Minor, relating their baptismal vocation to the coming persecution. In the early Church only the martyrs were granted the honors of sainthood. In this we have a valid insight into the nature of the Christian vocation: to witness to the saving act of Jesus Christ for all mankind. The martyr – a word which actually means *witness* – gives testimony to Christ's Lordship with his blood. Baptismal solidarity with Christ, which carries with it a heavy

responsibility of joining with Him in the redemption of the world, may be extremely difficult, especially in times of persecution. And yet, the individual Christian, united and strengthened by Christ through the Holy Spirit, is also, through this unity, united with and strengthened by his brother and sister Christians throughout the world (1 Pet 5:9-11).

Only by taking Christ as our model and living in the Spirit can we persevere in the midst of tribulations, for it is Jesus Christ, although he was just and innocent, who died for the unjust and the guilty. *“If you are reproached in the name of Christ, you are blessed”* [1 Pet 4:14] because of your conduct and your union with the Lord. The trials we suffer can display our patience as Christians. Instead of being angered by the evil done to us, we should return good for evil and show understanding and love to those who persecute us.

### **Unity of the Two Testaments.**

Peter gives elegant expression to the organic development of God’s plan for our happiness. This plan, initiated by God under the old covenant, found fulfillment in Christ, and is now become possible for all of humanity through Christ’s Body, the Church.

*“Concerning this salvation, prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and investigated it, investigating the time and circumstances that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you with regard to the things that have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels longed to look.” – 1 Pet 1:10-12*

Furthermore, throughout the letter he speaks of the “new realities” which Christ has accomplished in terms of the great acts of God for His people under the old dispensation. In some ways we might speak of a large section of this brief letter as a mere compilation of texts from the Old Testament, as you can see by consulting any Bible with thorough footnote references. But to speak of 1 Peter as an anthology of Old Testament texts is to miss the point completely. Rather, Peter has achieved a marvelous synthesis of the Old and New Testaments, one shedding light upon the other to present the fullness of the “mystery of the whole Christ.”

### **1 Peter in the Liturgy.**

We find passages from 1 Peter among the readings at Mass throughout the year. For example, during the Sundays of Year A, we find several readings from 1 Peter, especially during the Easter Season:

- ✠ On the Second Sunday of Easter, the second reading contains Peter’s beautiful words from the opening verses of his letter (1 Pet 1:3-9), words of encouragement and joy in a time of trial.
- ✠ On the Third Sunday of Easter, our reading is from 1 Pet 1:17-21, a passage designed to reinforce our faith in Jesus Christ and our hope in the Resurrection.
- ✠ On the Fifth Sunday of Easter, the reading is from 1 Pet 2:4-9, and defines for us the value of our faith in Jesus Christ: that we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own...”
- ✠ On the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Peter gives us instruction in living the Christian life (1 Pet 3:15-18), a life of charity, a life of the Spirit, a life of evangelization.
- ✠ On the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the second reading is from 1 Pet 4:13-16, in which Peter instructs us on the merit of suffering in the name of Jesus Christ and for the glory of the Father.

We also encounter 1 Peter on the First Sunday of Lent (Year B) when we read 1 Pet 3:18-22, which tells us of the merits of Baptism and the redemptive value of Christ’s suffering and death.

Finally, we find readings from 1 Peter during a number of weekday Masses in Year 2, including Solemnities such as the Nativity of John the Baptist on June 24. This is an especially fitting application of Peter's First Letter since the passage chosen (1 Pet 1:8-12) touches on both Baptism and the prophets who told of Christ's coming into the world.

**Be Doers of the Word.**

While we in this country have been spared the "trial by fire" of which Peter spoke to the Christians of his day, we must remember that Christ's Church is never free from persecution. Indeed, it is being persecuted this very day in many places throughout the globe. And no one can predict what the future may bring, even in this country. Our Lord told us that, "The servant is not greater than the master," and throughout history He has called many to relive in their own lives His passion and death. We who are not persecuted as His disciples find ourselves under a different sort of burden, that of compassion and effective charity for the victims of the "powers of darkness" in our own day. Those suffering Christians must never be absent from our thoughts as we make Peter's prayer our prayer: that "*God the source of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself, after you have suffered a little while, perfect, steady, strengthen and firmly establish you.*" Each of us, in his or her own way, should do all that we can to help our fellow Christians, and for that matter, our fellow children of God, who suffer persecution for their beliefs.

**Study Questions:**

1. What gave the early Christian community its distinctive character? [See 1 Pet 1:6-25.]
2. How, according to Peter, do we achieve the holiness that is proper to God's people?
3. What, according to Peter, is the relationship of the Church to the world?
4. Consider Peter's various instructions relating to Christians and the Empire (marriage, slavery, etc.) found in 1 Pet 2:11-3:13. Which of these would you say are universally valid?
5. Why would Peter use the sacrament of Baptism and its ritual as a means of instructing the Christians of Asia Minor at this particular time?