

3.9.80
10.45 a.m.

ARCIC 230/Petrine Texts/5.

VENICE 24(a)

The position of Peter among the apostles has often been discussed in relation to the importance of the Bishop of Rome among the bishops. This requires that we look at the data of the New Testament and its so-called Petrine Texts.

While explicitly stressing Christ's will to root the Church in the apostolic witness and mandate, the New Testament attributes to Peter a special position among the Twelve. Whether the Petrine texts contain the authentic words of Jesus or not, they witness to an early tradition that Peter already held this place during Jesus' ministry. Individually the indications may seem to be inconclusive, but taken together they provide a general picture of his prominence. The most important are: the bestowal on Simon of the name Cephas, his being mentioned first among the Twelve and in the smaller circle of the three (Peter, James and John), the confession of Jesus' Messiahship (Matthew 16:16, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20 and John 6:69), the charge to strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:31, 32) and to feed the sheep (John 21:16-18) and the special appearance to him of the risen Lord (e.g. Luke 24:34, I Cor.15:5). Although it may have been the intention of the author of Acts to underline the parallel apostolic authority of Paul in the latter part of his book, yet the first half focuses on Peter's leadership. For instance, it is Peter who frequently speaks in the name of the apostolic community, he is the first to proclaim the gospel to the Jews and the first to open the Christian community to the Gentiles. Paul seems to have recognized this prominence of Peter among the apostles as well as the importance of James (Gal 1:18f), and to have accepted the lead given by Peter at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), even though he was prepared to argue strongly with Peter when he held Peter to be at fault (Gal.2:11).

Pastoral responsibility was not restricted exclusively to Peter. The expression "binding and loosing", which is used for the explicit commission to Peter in Matthew 16:19, appears again in Matthew 18:18 in the promise made by Christ directly to the disciples. Similarly the foundation upon which the church is built is related to Peter in Matthew 16:18 and to the whole apostolic body elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g. Eph.2:20). Even though Peter was the spokesman at Pentecost, the charge to proclaim the gospel to all the world had previously been given by the risen Christ to the Eleven (Acts 1:2-8). Paul also, although he was not among the Twelve, was conspicuous for the leadership which he exercised with an authority received from the Lord himself, claiming to share with Peter and others parallel responsibility and apostolic authority (Gal.2:7, 8; I Cor.9:1).

In the eyes of the New Testament writers Peter holds a position of special importance, not simply because of his own gifts and character but because of his particular calling by Christ. Yet, even when the distinctive features of Peter's ministry are stressed, this ministry is not different in kind from that of the other apostles and does not isolate him from them. As in the teaching of Jesus true leadership is that of service, not of domination over others (Luke 22:24-27), so Peter's role in strengthening the brethren (Luke 22:31, 32) is a leadership of service. Peter, then, serves the Church by helping it to overcome threats to its unity (e.g. Acts 11:4 ff), even if in the same matter his weakness may require help or correction, as is clear from his rebuke by Paul (Gal 2:11). These considerations help clarify the analogy that has been drawn between the role of Peter among the apostles and that of the bishop of Rome among his fellow bishops.

The New Testament contains no explicit record of a transmission of Peter's leadership; nor is the transmission of apostolic authority in general very clear. Furthermore, the Petrine texts were subjected to differing interpretations as early as the time of the Church Fathers. Yet the Church at Rome, the city in which Peter and Paul taught and were martyred, came to be recognized as possessing a unique responsibility among the churches: its bishop was seen to exercise a special service in relation to the unity of the churches, and to fidelity to the apostolic inheritance, thus exercising among his fellow bishops functions analogous to those ascribed to Peter, whose successor the Bishop of Rome was claimed to be.

Fathers and doctors of the Church gradually came to interpret the New Testament data as pointing in the same direction. This interpretation has been questioned, and it has been argued that it arose from an attempt to legitimize a development which had already occurred. Nevertheless it is possible to think that the New Testament texts offer no sufficient basis but still to see a primacy of the Bishop of Rome as desirable or even as part of God's purpose serving the Church's unity and catholicity.

Our two traditions agree that not everything said of the apostles as the prime witnesses of Jesus Christ and foundations of the Church of God is transmitted to those chosen to continue their mission. The apostles are the foundations precisely because they are the unique, commissioned witnesses to the once-for-all saving work of Christ. Peter's role is never isolated from that of the apostolic group; what is true of the transmissibility of the mission of the apostolic group is true of Peter as a member of it. Though the sentence, "On this rock I will build my church", is spoken to Peter, this does not imply that the same words can be applied to the Bishop of Rome with an identical meaning. Even if Peter's role cannot be transmitted in its

totality, however, this does not exclude the possibility of a ministry of unity guided by the Spirit among those who continue the apostolic mission.

If the leadership of the Bishop of Rome has at times been rejected by those who thought it was not faithful to the truth of the gospel and hence not a true focus of unity, we nevertheless agree that a universal primacy will be needed in a united church and should appropriately be the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, as we have specified it. Certainly, the New Testament data taken as a whole show Peter to play a clear role of leadership but do not portray the Church's unity and universality exclusively in terms of Peter. The universal communion of the churches is a company of believers, united by faith in Christ, by the preaching of the Word, and by participation in the sacraments assured to them by a pastoral ministry of apostolic order. In this society, a Petrine ministry would be a sign and safeguard of unity in the good order and succession of universal communion of the churches in Christ.