Section I - Pastoral Duty

John 21:15-17

“I am going fishing,” Peter said to his companions sometime after all of them had left Jerusalem and returned to the region around the Sea of Galilee (Jn. 21:3). “We will also come with you,” replied Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John, and two others who are not named. There were seven of them, counting Peter. These were probably the only ones of the Eleven who were fishermen by trade. Everyone went on that fishing expedition con amore (with love; very earnestly). We presume, in the first place, that it was an expedition to get food. But it was also more than that. They were returning to their beloved old habits and familiar surroundings. It brought back many fond memories of the past. The trip was recreation as well as comfort to them. They welcomed it, because they had just gone through very painful and emotional experiences. It was a vacation for men who had become fatigued by their sorrow, the surprises they experienced, and by constantly being on guard. Every student who has over-taxed his brain and every craftsman who has worked until his muscles ached know first-hand about the abandon with which those seven disciples threw themselves into their boats and sailed out into the depths of the Sea of Galilee to practice their former trade.

What were these men thinking about while they were out on the water that night? Since Jesus made a significant reference to Peter’s youthfulness in His words spoken the next morning, we think their thoughts could have been something like this: “After all, is it not better to be simple fishermen than to be apostles of the Christian religion? What have we received by following Jesus? Certainly not what we expected. And do we have any reason to expect better things in the future? Our Master told us that what happens to us in the future will be similar to what He experienced - a life of sorrow probably ending in martyrdom. But here in our native province of Galilee, we can pursue our old calling. We can think, believe, and act as we please. And we will live in obscurity and be protected from all danger. We will be delightfully free and independent in this rustic life by the shores of the Sea! In earlier days, before we left our nets and followed Jesus, we put on our fishermen’s coats and walked wherever we wanted. When we become Apostles, all of that will end. We will be carrying a heavy burden of responsibility and will be obligated to constantly think about others, not ourselves. There is a possibility that we could have our personal liberty taken away. In fact, we may lose our lives.”
By putting these words into the mouths of the disciples, we do not violate probability. Their feelings are both natural and common in light of the serious responsibilities and dangers they are about to face. Perhaps no one ever put his hand to the plow, the plow of a difficult undertaking, without momentarily giving into the temptation to look back (see Lk. 9:62). It is a weakness that easily plagues human nature.

Yet, even though it is natural for people to look back, it is not wise. The thoughts that people have about their pasts are, for the most part, deceptive. This was certainly true in the case of the disciples. If the simple life they left behind was so happy, why did they leave it? Why were they so quick to leave their nets and boats to follow Jesus? Ah! Fishing in the blue waters of the Sea of Galilee did not satisfy every aspect of their beings. Life is more than food.

The kingdom of God is man's primary purpose. Furthermore, the life of a fisherman has its downside. It is by no means as romantic as it seems. You might sometimes go out with your nets, work at it all night, and catch absolutely nothing.

**Jesus Awakens the Seven Disciples**

This actually happened in the present situation. “That night they caught nothing” (Jn. 21:3b). The circumstances probably helped break the spell of romance and awakened the seven disciples from a dream. Whatever the case, there was One who knew all of their thoughts and would see to it that they did not maintain these feelings very long. “But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach” (vs. 4). He has come to reveal Himself to His disciples for the third time (the sixth appearance since He had risen), not as before, when He tried to convince them He had risen. This time He encouraged them to dedicate their minds and hearts to their future vocation - being fishers of men and under-shepherds of the flock. He wanted to do this before He departed from the world. All of His actions on this occasion are focused on that one purpose. First, He gives them instructions on how to catch a great haul of fish, reminds them of their former call to be His Apostles, and personally becomes an encouragement to them about their success in their apostolic work. Then He invites them to eat the fish He had already prepared on a fire that He had made on the shore. He wanted to cure them of the concerns of this world and to assure them that if they would seek to serve the kingdom with an undivided heart, He would take care of all of their desires. Finally, when the morning meal was over, He started a conversation with the disciple who had been the leader in the adventure on the lake that night and spoke so that all of the disciples could hear Him. He addressed Peter in a style that was intended to bring out all of his potential enthusiasm, as well as the enthusiasm of all of those present.

On the surface, the words Jesus spoke to Peter seem to pertain only to him. His purpose seems to be to restore him to his position as an Apostle, a position that Peter might have thought he
had forfeited because of his conduct at the high priest’s palace. This is the view commonly held about this memorable scene which occurred on the shore of the Sea. And whether we agree with it or not, we must admit that, for some reason or another, the Lord Jesus wanted to remind Peter of his recent failures. References to some of Peter’s past history are unmistakable. Even the time He selected to have the conversation is significant. It was while they were eating that Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. After they drank, Jesus gave His disciples His new commandment of love, and Peter vehemently affirmed his devotion to his Master and His cause. The name by which the risen Lord addressed His disciple - not Peter, but Simon son of Jonas - was intended to remind him of his weakness and of the occasion when Jesus warned him that Satan was about to sift him like wheat. At that time, He called him by the same name. Jesus repeated the question, “Do you love Me?” three times. This could not fail to remind Peter of his three-fold denial and to renew his grief. Note the form in which the question was first asked - “Do you love Me more than these?” (Jn. 21:15). This contains a clear allusion to Peter’s declaration, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Mt. 26:33). The command, “Tend My lambs,” points back to the prophetic announcement that Jesus made on the way to the Mount of Olives: “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (Mt. 26:31). He was saying to Peter, “Do not let the sheep be scattered like you were for a period of time.” The command, “Tend My lambs,” which is Jesus’ response to the first question, “Do you love Me more than these?” makes us think of these words: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk. 22:32). The idea suggested in both cases is the same, namely, that the man who has fallen the most deeply and learned the most thoroughly what his own weaknesses are is, or ought to be, the best qualified person for strengthening those who are weak - for feeding the lambs.

Even with all of these references to Peter’s fall, we are not able to agree with those who maintain that, during this meeting, Jesus formally restored the erring disciple to his position as an Apostle. We do not deny that Peter needed restoration to comfort him and give him peace of mind after what he had done. But our difficulty is this: “Had he not been restored already? What was the meaning of that private meeting between him and Jesus, and what happened as a result of that meeting?” Who can doubt that after that meeting Peter’s mind was put at ease and, from that time on, he was at peace, both with himself and with his Master? If more evidence is needed to prove this point, look at Peter’s behavior when he recognized Jesus from the boat. As the Master stood on the shore in the gray morning, Peter threw himself into the sea because he was in such a hurry to be near his beloved Lord. Would a man who was afflicted with a guilty conscience act like this? Yet someone will argue, “There was still a need for a formal, public restoration since the offense that was caused by Peter’s sin was public.” We don’t believe this. But even if we agreed with this position, what do we make of it? Why didn’t the restoration take place sooner, at the first or second meeting in Jerusalem? Then consider this question: “Does the encounter by the shores of the sea really look like a formal transaction?” Can we consider that casual, easy, inti-
mate meeting and conversation after breakfast with two-thirds of the disciples as an ecclesiastical meeting that was assembled for the solemn purpose of restoring a fallen brother to church fellowship? The idea is too cold and academic for anyone to take it seriously. One more objection to this theory needs to be stated: It fails to provide unity for the various parts of the whole picture. It may explain the questioning to which Jesus subjected Peter, but it does not explain the prophetic reference to his future history that He spoke about next. Peter’s fall did not suggest this kind of thinking. There is no connection that can be made between these two statements: “I allow you to be an Apostle, even though you have sinned in the past,” and “I am warning you, that as an Apostle, you will not have the freedom which you enjoyed in earlier days”. For his actions did not spring from a love of freedom but from the fear of man.

Peter’s Recall
This encounter is not about Peter being restored to a position he had forfeited but his recall to a more solemn understanding of his high calling. It seems to us that the thrust of Christ’s words to him, and to all of his fellow-disciples, is not “I allow you,” but “I urge you.” By every means possible, Jesus would move them to give their hearts and souls to their apostolic work. He wanted them to let the boats, nets, and everything else alone - forever. “Remember your own weakness,” He would say to Peter. “Do your work because of my forgiving love and your gratitude for it. Do it because your brothers need it. Your own past failure may teach you to be understanding and compassionate. Do it because you are so devoted to Me. Taking all these things into consideration, I charge you, on the evening before My departure, to be a hero. Play the man. Be strong for others, not for yourself. ‘Shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness’ (I Pt. 5:2). Do not avoid responsibility. Do not covet leisure. Bend your neck to the yoke and let love make it light. Liberty is sweet to your heart. But patient, burden-bearing love, though less pleasant, is far more noble.”

Jesus wanted this message to be heard by everyone present. Peter was just the most appropriate one to be selected as the medium for conveying it. He was an excellent “text” on which to preach a sermon on consecration. His character and conduct furnished all the poetry, argument, and illustration that was necessary to give passion and substance to the theme. How his spontaneous, passionate spirit loved unrestrained freedom! And what heart is not touched when it hears that a man like Peter has disciplined his excitable, temperamental spirit to become patient and submissive? The young, playful, determined fisherman went here and there and did just as he pleased; the old, saintly Apostle, meek as a lamb, stretched forth his arms to be bound for martyrdom. What a moving contrast! In some ways, Peter was the strongest character of the Twelve. Yet this passionate man was in other senses the weakest. Who, therefore, could better illustrate man’s need for shepherding? Had he learned what his weaknesses were? Through this knowledge, had he grown even stronger? If so, then how could anyone better state the general responsibility for
the strong to help the weak than by assigning Peter the special duty of taking care of the weakest? When Jesus said to Peter, “Feed My lambs,” He was saying to all the Apostles, “Feed My sheep.”

When Jesus required Peter to demonstrate his love by becoming a shepherd to the little flock of believers, He adapted His demand to his spiritual capacity. Loving the Savior does not necessarily mean one will feed the sheep. When Jesus’ disciples are immature and inexperienced, they are sheep. Only when the weak become strong and established in grace can they become shepherds and care for others. As Jesus gives Peter and his brothers these pastoral responsibilities, He is making an announcement that they have now passed, or are about to pass, out of the category of being weak into the category of being strong. In essence, He says to them, “Until now, you have been like sheep. You needed to be guided, watched over, and defended by the wisdom and courage of someone else. Now, however, the time has come for you to become shepherds. You must be able and willing to do for the weak what I have done for you. Until now, you have allowed Me to care for you. From now on, you must get used to the idea that you must be looked to as guardians, in the same way that you looked to Me. Until now, you have been like children under Me, your Parent. From now on, you must be parents yourselves and take charge of the children. Until now, you have been like raw recruits, likely to panic and flee from danger. From now on, you must be like captains who have conquered their fears. By your calm determination, you must inspire the soldiers of the cross by acting like heroes - daring.” To summarize, Jesus, announces to Peter and the rest that they are now ready to make the transition from boyhood to manhood. They would change from being students and would begin to govern themselves; from being dependent and being exempt from caring for others, to having influence, authority, and responsibility. They would be leaders and commanders in the Christian community, doing the work for which they had been trained for so long. This transition and transformation actually took place shortly afterwards. The disciples assumed the position of Christ’s deputies or substitutes after His ascension. Peter was the main leader, though not the Pope, in the infant Church. And their character was changed to prepare them for their high positions. The timid disciples became bold Apostles. Peter, who weakly denied the Lord in the courtyard, heroically confessed Him before the Sanhedrin. The ignorant and uncomprehending disciples, who had been continually misunderstanding their Master’s words, became filled with the spirit of wisdom and understanding. People listened to their words as if they were listening to the very words of Jesus Himself.

**Shepherds or Sheep?**

We have said that loving Christ does not automatically imply His disciples will take on the role of a shepherd. Rather, loving Him is demonstrated in the greatest number of believers by their simply hearing the shepherd’s voice, following him, and being willing to be guided by those who are wiser than themselves. We must add that all who are motivated by the spirit of love for the Redeemer will either be shepherds or sheep. They will either be used in caring for the souls of
others or thankfully using the provision which has been made for the care of their own souls. Too many, however, do not fall under either category. True, some are sheep, but sheep that have gone astray. Others are neither sheep nor shepherds. They are self-reliant but have no interest in helping others. They are too self-willed to be led but have no inclination to make their strength and experience available for their brothers and sisters. They utilize all their talents in order to serve their own personal interests. These kinds of people can be found in the Church and the State. They will do anything to avoid holding office or taking responsibility, and they severely criticize those who have placed themselves under the authority of the Church. They comment on their timidity and bondage, in a similar way that unbroken colts (if they could speak) might comment on the tameness of horses who have been harnessed. The bits and bridles that form a part of the Church harness come in the form of confessions and become the target of their censure.

Now, it is alright to be like a wild colt, rejoicing in unrestrained liberty for a period of time while one is young. But it is not acceptable to resist the yoke for a lifetime. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). Without a doubt, it is fun to be free of responsibility and to live without being restrained in one's opinions and actions. Who wouldn't want to throw off those who depend on us, to live the life of gods, without any concern for others? However, it is not the main purpose for any person's existence, certainly not for someone who is wise and strong, to be free from caring for others or free from trouble. Whoever has a Christian heart must feel that he is strong and wise for the sake of others who want strength and wisdom. He will fulfill the shepherd’s office, even though he approaches his responsibilities with fear and trembling and is conscious of the fact that he is agreeing to have his freedom and independence greatly curtailed. The yoke of love which binds us to others is not always easy, and the burden of caring for them is not light. But, for the most part, it is better and more noble to be a subordinate serving under someone who is loving than to be a free person living in utter selfishness. It is better that Peter is a prisoner and martyr for the gospel, than Simon begging his Lord to “save Yourself” or basking in luxurious ease on the Mount of Transfiguration saying, “Lord, it is good to be here” (Mt. 17:4). It is better to be bound by others and led to death as a good shepherd who is sacrificed for the sheep, than Simon putting on his own clothes and walking along with an apathetic attitude like that of a modern pococurantist (an indifferent, apathetic person). It may be acceptable to dream or sing about living life by the ocean, in the woods, in the mountains, or in the clouds. But the only life from which genuine heroism and poetry comes is the one who spends it on this solid, ordinary earth, engaged in the humble work of doing good.

Evidence for Peter’s Readiness
Finally, take a look at the evidence that is given in Peter’s answers to his Lord’s questions, that he is truly ready for the responsible work to which he has been called. It is not simply that he can
come to Jesus as the One who knows all things and say, “You know that I love You” (Jn. 21:17). For, as we have already suggested, every sincere disciple can do that. There are two specific signs of spiritual maturity that can be discerned here. They are never found in anyone who is weak in grace and are not found previously in Peter himself. First, there is an obvious humility - very noticeable in such a driven man. Peter no longer makes comparisons between himself and his brothers like he had done before. In spite of what seems to be true, he argues that he does love Jesus, but he is careful not to say, “I love You more than they do.” Not only does he not say this, but he doesn't even think it. The bragging spirit has left him. He is a humble, subdued, wise man and is spiritually prepared for the pastorate for the simple reason that he has stopped thinking about himself as supremely competent for it.

The second sign of maturity that can be discerned in Peter’s responses is godly sorrow for his past failure: “Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’” (Jn. 21:17). He was grieved because when he was asked three times about his love, he was reminded that his three-fold denial was the reason for calling his love into question. Notice, in particular, the feeling that emerged over this delicate reference to his former sins. It was grief - not irritation, anger, or shame. There is no pride, passion, or vanity in this man’s soul; only holy, meek contrition. One cannot observe any sudden rush of blood to his face but only the gracious, softened expression of a penitent, chastised spirit. The man who can accept these references to his sins is not only able to tend the sheep; he can even nurse the lambs. In a spirit of meekness, he will restore those who have fallen. He will be compassionate toward offenders, not with a questionable love that is unwilling to condemn sin strongly, but with a genuine love from one who has received mercy for the sins he has repented of. Because of his kind compassion, sinners will be converted to God, having genuine sorrow in their hearts for their offenses and humble hope that they will be pardoned. By Peter’s watchful care, many sheep will be kept from ever straying from the fold.