Section II - Pastor Pastorum (A Pastor of Pastors)
John 21:19-22
If one wishes to fulfill his duty as an under-shepherd, he must be a faithful sheep and follow the Chief Shepherd wherever He goes. Pastors are not lords over God’s people. They are simply servants of Christ, who is the great Head of the Church, and are required to think of His will as their law and His life as their example. When Jesus met with them by the Sea of Galilee, He was careful to help His disciples understand this. He did not allow them to think that He was abdicating His position as Shepherd and Bishop of souls just because He was giving them the responsibility of pastoring His flock. After He told Peter to “feed My lambs,” and “feed My sheep,” He said to them as His final word, “Follow Me.”

It is implied in the narrative that, as Jesus was saying this, He got up and walked away from the spot where the disciples had just eaten breakfast. We are not told where He went, but it may have been toward that “mountain in Galilee,” the place where the risen Savior had previously decided He would rendezvous with “more than five hundred brethren at one time” (I Cor. 15:6). Without a doubt, the sheep have been making their way there to meet their divine Shepherd, as if to a secluded fold in the hill country. Peter is invited to join his Master there, and it is more than possible that the purpose of the journey is to introduce him to the flock which has just been committed to his care.

Whatever the case may be, Peter obeyed the call and immediately went to meet Jesus. His first impression was probably that he would be the only person there with Jesus. Peter’s natural desire to size up the situation led him to look over his shoulder to see what his companions were doing. When he turned around, he observed the disciple whom Jesus loved - and whom he loved - following close behind. Immediately a question came to his mind, “Lord, and what about this man?” The question was rhetorical, but it meant: “John is following us. Is the same fate going to come to him that you have prophesied for me? Will he also be bound and led to a place that he does not want to go? Or, since he is the disciple You most dearly love, will he be exempt from the hardships I am going to have to endure?”
We believe Peter was afraid that John would receive a better and happier outcome in life than he. He couldn’t help but remember the time when John’s mother made her ambitious request for her two sons. And in spite of what Jesus had said to them about tasting His cup and being baptized with His baptism, Peter might have imagined that John’s desire would be fulfilled, that he would live to see the kingdom come and share in its rewards. It is possible He could have had these thoughts, especially since all of the disciples, down to the very last day their Lord lived on earth, still expected the kingdom to be restored to Israel very soon. If Peter was thinking like this, it is not surprising that he would ask, if not out of envy, at least with sad feeling over his own loss, “Lord, and what about this man?” Adversity is hard to bear. But it is hardest when one’s personal struggles are compared with the prosperity of a brother who started his career at the same time and had no better prospects than the person whom he has beaten in the race.

**Jesus’ Response to Peter’s Question**

Jesus, however, did not seem to take these issues into consideration when He replied to Peter’s question, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” (Jn. 21:22). One is tempted to cry out, “How stern and cold!” Couldn’t Jesus have at least reminded Simon of the words He once spoke to James and John so he could be comforted: “You shall drink of My cup”? Wouldn’t it have helped Peter to follow his Master with more enthusiasm in the difficult path of the cross if He had told him that no matter how John died, he would also have to suffer for the gospel? Wouldn’t it have helped him to know that participation in the glory of the kingdom did not depend on longevity; that, in fact, the first to die would be the first to enter into glory? The answer to these questions is “no.” If He had given him this kind of comfort, it would have played into the hands of Peter’s weakness. Anyone who wants to be a soldier must be trained with military rigor. Weakness, longing for happiness, sulking over the pleasures that are missed are out of place in an apostle’s character. And Jesus, who abhors this kind of thinking, will make sure He does not give them any consideration. He wants all of His followers, and especially the leaders of His people, to be heroes, promptly doing what is commanded, fearless when it comes to danger, patient when fatigued, and without a trace of selfish softness. He will not even allow room for natural weaknesses; He disregards any present pain; and does not care how we may smart when we are rebuked, provided that He achieves His goal - the production of character that is temptation-proof.

Having this goal in mind, Jesus did not waste any time correcting Peter’s wrong thinking about his brother disciple. We say, “wrong thinking,” because that is what it was. John did not stay around until the Lord came, in the sense that Peter understood the words. True, he lived until the close of the first Christian century, a long time after the Lord came to execute judgment on Jerusalem. However, except for the longevity he enjoyed, the last of the Apostles was in no way to be envied. The Church was militant all his days. He took part in many battles and received
many scars. A companion with Peter in the Church's first conflict with the world, he was a prisoner on Patmos for the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ after Peter had died. It might be said that because of his temperament, John was less exciting than his brother Apostle. He was not as impetuous as Peter but was just as intense. Perhaps his character did not provoke the world to opposition like Peter’s did. Peter, however, because of his virtues and his weaknesses, was predestined to be the champion of the faith, the Martin Luther of the apostolic age. He gave and received the hardest blows and bore the brunt of the battle. John, on the other hand, was the Melanchthon among the Apostles [without Melanchthon’s tendency to give in; Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) was a faithful co-worker with Luther]. Because of this, he probably enjoyed a quieter and, for the most part, a more peaceful life. But this difference between the two men was really insignificant. All things considered, we may say that John did not drink any less deeply of Christ’s cup than Peter did. There was nothing glorious or enviable about his lot on earth except the vision on Patmos of the glory that is yet to be revealed.

Yet, while all of this was clear to His all-seeing eye, Jesus did not stoop to Peter’s level to give any explanations about the appointed fate of the beloved disciple. Instead, He allowed Peter to think whatever he wanted about the future of his friend. He said, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?” He was not giving any information as some contemporary believers imagine. Rather, He refused to give any and was blunt and decisive in the way He responded to him. “Suppose” - this is the thrust of the words - “Suppose I wanted John to remain on the earth until I return to it. What difference does it make to you? Suppose I let him sit on My right hand in My Messianic kingdom. Again, I ask, what difference does it make to you? Suppose John did not die but survived until My second coming (like another Elijah); suppose he was taken directly into heaven or was given a body that had the power to live forever. Still, what difference does it make to you? YOU FOLLOW ME.”

The First Pope?
The emphatic repetition of His command is very significant. For one thing, it proves that when Jesus said to Peter, “Feed My sheep,” He had no intention of making him a pastor of pastors, a shepherd or bishop over his fellow disciples. In Roman Catholic theology, the lambs are the lay members of the church, and the sheep are the under-shepherds (all of the clergy, with the exception of the Pope). If this is true, how strange that Peter would be stopped in his tracks for looking after one of the flock and for asking a simple question like this: “Lord, and what about this man?” Jesus replies to him as if he was a busybody, meddling with things he shouldn’t. And truthfully, busybodyism was one of Peter’s faults. He loved to look after and manage other people. On more than one occasion, he tried to manage the Lord Himself. It is interesting to note that it is from Peter that the Church receives the proper warning against meddling (a vice that is all too common). He writes in his first epistle, “By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evil-doer, or a troublesome meddler (emphasis added)” (I Pt. 4:15). The literal translation means,
“As a bishop intruding into another’s diocese.” Evidently, the frequent rebukes Peter received from his Master had made a lasting impression on him.

Even though Peter’s load of responsibility was heavy, it was certainly not as overwhelming as that of being a visible Christ, so to speak, to the whole Church. Neither Peter nor any other person is able to bear that burden. Thankfully, no one is required to do so. The responsibilities of even the highest leaders in the Church are restricted and fall within comparatively narrow boundaries. The main business, even of the most important under-shepherds, is not to make others follow Christ but to follow Him themselves. It is wonderful that our Lord made this clear by using the words He did with the top representative of the Apostles. For Christians who are active, energetic, and sincere are prone to have very exaggerated ideas about their responsibilities and to take on themselves the care of the whole world. They tend to impose on themselves the responsibility of finding a solution for every evil that is done under the sun. They act like generals, defenders of the faith wherever attacked, correcting all wrongs, pastors of all souls. There is something noble as well as unrealistic in this thinking. And if a man did not have this excessive, over-zealous spirit at some time during his life, it would tend to demonstrate that he did not have strong moral convictions. Still, it should be understood that the Head of the Church does not impose this unlimited responsibility on any person. And when it is self-imposed, it does not contribute to a person’s real usefulness. One person cannot do everyone else’s work, and one person cannot be responsible for everyone else’s errors and failures. Each person makes his most effective contribution for everyone’s good when he lives his own life by godly principles. The world is full of evils - skepticism, superstition, ignorance, immorality - everywhere. It is so sad. “What, then, am I to do?” This one thing, above everything else: YOU FOLLOW CHRIST. You be a believer and let all others be unbelievers, if that is their choice. Let your religion be sensible, and let those who want to, put their faith in a fallible human authority and place their religion in imaginary ritualisms and gross idolatries. You be holy, an example of sober-mindedness, justice, and godliness, even if the whole world becomes a bastion of impurity, fraud, and ungodliness. Say with Joshua, “But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:15).

Follow Me
The repeated command, “You follow Me,” demands undivided attention to personal duty while restricting individual responsibility. Christ expects His disciples to follow Him with integrity of heart, without distraction, without murmuring, envy, or weighing consequences. I am afraid Peter had not yet met this standard. Still lingering in his heart was a fleshly desire for happiness as the chief end of man. He desired to be exempt from the cross and probably thought Christ would grant this exemption. He did not yet understand that Christ, more often than not, shows
special favor to His followers by making them, to a remarkable degree, partakers of His bitter cup and His bloody baptism. Paul's enthusiasm, which made him desire to know Jesus in the fellowship of His sufferings, had not yet taken possession of Simon's heart. When a difficult and dangerous work of service was to be done, those who were selected for the unhappy task seemed to Peter to be pitied rather than envied. He was far from volunteering for such service and would rather congratulate himself for having escaped it. In his opinion, the highest conceivable virtue was submission to the inevitable (in the event it was impossible to escape).

Peter was also deficient at this time in the military virtue of unquestioning obedience to orders. This is the secret of an army's strength. A general says, “Go,” and he goes; to another, “Come,” and he comes. He commands that one corps make its station here and to another its station there. No one ventures to ask why, or to make envious comparisons. There is an absolute surrender of the individual will to the will of the commander. And concerning the issue of a person's preference, each man is a machine, having a will, a head, a hand, and a heart only so he can effectively perform his own assigned task. Peter had not yet attained this degree of self-denial. He could not simply do what he was told to do but had to look around to see what someone else was doing. Do not think this was a small problem he had. It was a breach of discipline that could not be overlooked by the Commander of the faithful. Implicit obedience is as necessary in the Church as it is in the army. The old soldier Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) understood this. Consequently, he introduced a system of military discipline into the constitution of the “Society of Jesus.” And the history of that society shows the wisdom of the founder. No matter what we think about the quality of the work that has been done by them, we cannot deny the energy of the Jesuits nor the devotion of its members. Christ demands of all of His people the same devotion that the Jesuit renders to the will of his spiritual superior. Actually, it cannot be rendered to another human without irreverence. Christ wants every believer to give himself up to His will with cheerful, exact, habitual obedience. He wants His children to think of all of His orders as wise, all His arrangements good, acknowledging His right to lead as He pleases, content to serve Him in a little place or in a big one, by doing or by suffering, for a long period or a short one, in life or by death, if only He be glorified.

This is our duty. It is also our blessing. When we begin to think this way, we will be delivered from all concern about consequences, from ambitious thoughts about our responsibilities, from imaginary hurts, from envy, worry, and the restlessness of self-will. We will no longer be distracted or tormented by constantly looking around to see what is happening to this or that fellow disciple. We will be able to go on with our own work with composure and peace. We will not trouble ourselves with our own future or with anyone else's but will live healthily and happily in the present. We will get rid of fear, concerns, scheming, disappointments, and frustrations - forever. Like the larks at heaven's gate, we will sing:
Father, I know that all my life
   Is portioned out by Thee,
And the changes that will surely come
   I do not fear to see;
But I ask Thee for a present mind,
   Intent on serving Thee.

I would not have the restless will
   That hurries to and fro,
Seeking for some great thing to do,
   Or secret thing to know;
I would be treated as a child,
   And guided where I go.

Thus, brothers and sisters, “go your way until the end comes.” And “you shall rest, and stand in your reward at the end of the days.”