PETER
Cornerstone of Catholicism
Study Guide
SESSION 10

Lectio™
Unveiling Scripture and Tradition

Tim Gray
OPENING PRAYER

“And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory. Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.’” —1 Peter 5:4-7

Heavenly Father, from the beginning of time the Church was planned in your heart as an instrument for man’s salvation. We thank you for your one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church—our Mother—that shepherds us continually back to you. Help us turn to the example of your disciples and martyrs, especially St. Peter, for strength, confidence, and joy as we continue to build your Kingdom on earth. We pray for true humility as the foundation of all our efforts. May we, like St. Peter, surrender ourselves, pick up our cross valiantly, and follow you day by day in the hope of obtaining the unfading crown of glory. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

St. Peter, pray for us.

INTRODUCTION

In the last session, we discussed the visions of Peter and the Roman Centurion Cornelius leading to the baptism of Cornelius and his household by Peter. A new age began for the Church as Gentiles were accepted into the Kingdom of God. Peter’s ensuing friendship with Cornelius helped Peter later when he fled from Herod Agrippa. The home of Cornelius became a haven and a point of transition as Peter moved from the Holy Land to Rome.

In this session we will explore Peter’s life in Rome and ultimately see how Peter obtained “the unfading crown of glory.” Peter, a mere fisherman who became the rock of the Church, will give witness to all that is possible when we follow Christ.
1. Have you ever visited St. Peter’s Basilica? If so, describe your experience. If not, think of a shrine, church, or holy site you have visited that impacted you. Share your experience.

2. Have you ever avoided a task you knew you were meant to do? Explain the circumstances and what you learned from the outcome.

3. Have you ever seen beauty in the midst of hardship or suffering? Share the experience with others in your group.

**WATCH VIDEO**

The following is a brief outline of the topics covered in the video teaching.

I. Peter in Rome—Basilica of Santa Pudentiana
   A. Where Peter stayed with Senator Pudens and his daughters
   B. Residence of popes until Constantine gave Lateran Palace
   C. Reminder of our early Christian story
      1. Depicts Peter receiving the keys from Jesus
      2. Houses half of the table believed to have been used by Peter during the celebration of the Eucharist
      3. Eucharistic miracle—burning host left mark in the marble

II. Finding Our Story
   A. Scripture and Tradition fit together
   B. Must regain our story by going back to our origins
   C. Knowing our story allows us to share it and leads to renewal in the Church
III. Quo Vadis?
   A. Peter accepts his cross
      1. Jesus, carrying the Cross, meets Peter on his escape from Rome
      2. “Domine, quo vadis?” (Lord, where are you going?) “To be crucified again.”
   B. Peter understands his mission and returns to Rome

IV. Martyrdom of Peter
   A. Jesus points to the Cross
   B. Synthesis of Scripture and Tradition–The Way
      1. Martyrdom foretold by Jesus in John 21
      2. Via Dolorosa - Peter has learned the Way of the Cross
      4. Idea of “The Way” matures Peter’s preaching on the Way of the Cross

V. Art
   A. Caravaggio–Crucifixion of Peter and Conversion of Paul
   B. Michelangelo–Pauline Chapel

VI. St. Peter’s Basilica Built over Peter’s Tomb
   A. First century male bones, minus feet
   B. Palm branches: early Christian symbol of victory—Romans 8:31

VII. bar-Jonah
   A. The Prophet Jonah was a key symbol for Peter
      1. Peter and his successors called to proclaim God’s message of mercy, forgiveness, and repentance to the nations
      2. Jonah is largest figure in Michelangelo’s painting of Last Judgment
   B. Peter’s profession prepares him for mission as bar-Jonah and establishes him as rock of Church
Discuss

1. Dr. Gray mentions that we as Catholics have lost our story. How does going back to the early Christian narrative help us to live fuller lives of faith and witness?

2. How did Peter move from refusing to accept Jesus’ suffering (see Matthew 16:22) to the decision to return to Rome on the Via Appia, knowing he would suffer there?

3. How do the works of Caravaggio and Michelangelo depict Peter? What do they say about Peter’s legacy?

4. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture...come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal” (CCC 80). What are some of the examples Dr. Gray uses to affirm this statement? Can you think of any from your personal experience?

5. What is the significance of “The Way” as discussed in the Gospel of Mark and its relationship to Peter’s martyrdom? Why is the theme of “The Way” framed by two accounts of the healing of blind men?
6. Do you think of Peter as a conqueror? Why or why not?

“After His Resurrection the Lord entrusted the Apostle Peter to shepherd His spiritual flock not because, that among the disciples only Peter alone was pre-deserved to shepherd the flock of Christ, but Christ addresses Himself chiefly to Peter because, that Peter was first among the Apostles and as such the representative of the Church...The Apostle Peter, true to his calling, gave his soul for the very flock of Christ, having sealed his apostleship by a martyr’s death, is now glorified throughout all the world...

...And so, brethren, celebrating now the memory of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, remembering their venerable sufferings, we esteem their true faith and holy life, we esteem the innocence of their sufferings and pure confession. Loving in them the sublime quality and imitating them by great exploits, “in which to be likened to them” (2 Thess 3: 5-9), and we shall attain to that eternal bliss which is prepared for all the saints. The path of our life before was more grievous, thornier, harder, but “we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12: 1), having passed by along it, made now for us easier, and lighter, and more readily passable. First there passed along it “the author and finisher of our faith,” our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Heb 12: 2); His daring Apostles followed after Him; then the martyrs, children, women, virgins and a great multitude of witnesses. Who acted in them and helped them on this path? He Who said, “Without Me ye can do nothing” (John 15: 5).” —Excerpts from the Sermon of St. Augustine of Hippo on Sts. Peter and Paul

MEMORY VERSE

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

—Romans 8:37-39

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for blessing the time we have spent together journeying alongside St. Peter. We give you thanks and praise for your holy Catholic Church, built on Peter and guided by Peter’s successors. Help us to pick up our cross and follow you in the example of St. Peter and the martyrs. Through his intercession and with the help of your Holy Spirit, may we persevere in love as we proclaim the good news to the nations. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.

St. Peter, pray for us.

FOR FURTHER READING

In the last session we took a closer look at the vision given to Peter in Joppa and the baptism of Cornelius and his household. When God poured out his Spirit on Cornelius, he made it clear that his plan of salvation was not for Jews only, but also for the Gentiles, meaning all of God’s sons and daughters in any nation. Peter stayed several days with Cornelius and his family after their baptism. Later when Herod Agrippa was searching to rearrest Peter and put him to death, St. Luke records that Peter went from Judea to Caesarea (see Acts 12:19). While Luke does not record the specific location in Caesarea, the home of Cornelius seems a logical destination since Peter had previously stayed with Cornelius’ family.

It is at this point that Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition meet. Scripture tells us that Herod Agrippa had the Apostle James martyred. The date generally assigned to James’ martyrdom is c. 42. Scripture also tells us that shortly after James’ martyrdom, Herod had Peter arrested. Peter’s miraculous escape from prison, his going from Judea to Caesarea, and his subsequent travel to Rome happened sometime mid-first century AD.

Important questions follow: How does a little-known fisherman from Galilee make the journey to Rome? And, having arrived in the capital city of the Roman Empire, where does he go? Cornelius is part of both answers. We know from Scripture that Cornelius served with the Italian Cohort in Caesarea. Cornelius would have had contacts back in Rome. Thus, it is likely that Cornelius assists Peter with his journey to Rome, sending letters of introduction to his friends and contacts there.

One tradition suggests that, while in Rome, Peter was hosted by a senator named Pudens. Here again Scripture and Tradition connect as Pudens is mentioned by name in Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy: “Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brethren” (2 Timothy 4:21).

Today the Church of St. Pudentiana (also known as Pudenziana), named after Pudens’ daughter, is built over what is believed to be the house of Pudens. In excavations at this site, a first-century brick was found with Pudens’ name impressed in the brick, the building custom of the time. The Church of St. Pudentiana is recognized as one of the oldest places of Christian worship in Rome. The home, and later the church built over it, was the residence of the popes until Constantine became emperor and offered the Church the Lateran Palace (known today as the Basilica of St. John Lateran).
The Church of St. Pudentiana has several wonderful relics and pieces of artwork. One in particular is located in the side chapel to the back left of the apse. Under the altar in this back chapel is part of the table upon which St. Peter would have celebrated the Eucharist while residing in Pudens’ home. When the papal residence was moved to St. John Lateran, the table was split in two, with one part remaining at St. Pudentiana’s and the other part embedded in the papal altar in St. John Lateran.

The apse mosaic at the Church of St. Pudentiana is among the oldest mosaics in Rome, dating back to the end of the fourth century. In it Jesus and the Apostles are dressed in senatorial robes, recalling Pudens’ senatorial rank. Pudens’ daughters, Prudentiana and Prassede, stand with victory wreaths behind the Apostles Peter and Paul, ready to crown them for their martyrdom in Rome. The buildings behind Jesus and the Apostles are the various churches built by Helena and Constantine in the Holy Land. The colonnade that appears to encircle Jesus and the Apostles is the circular pillared rotunda built around the tomb of Christ in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Thus, in the mosaic, Christ is sitting enthroned upon the tomb from which he rose from the dead in triumph. Just behind Jesus on a hill is a golden cross which images the magnificent cross that Constantine had placed upon the hill of Calvary in Jerusalem. In the heavens are the winged images of the four gospel writers (from left to right, the man represents Matthew, the ox represents Luke, the lion represents Mark, and the eagle represents John).

The Church of St. Pudentiana is also the site of a Eucharistic miracle. In 1610 AD a priest celebrating Mass was in doubt regarding the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. After consecration, he accidentally dropped a consecrated Host on the floor. The Host left an impression in the marble that can still be seen today. It seems fitting that the church over the site where Peter first celebrated the Eucharist in Rome would later be the site of a Eucharistic miracle.

Sadly, many pilgrims who visit Rome never visit the Church of St. Pudentiana. Located on a side street not far from the Basilica of St. Mary Major, its simple facade does not attract visitors to stop and enter. Many do not realize as they walk by that this is the ancient home from which St. Peter began laying the foundation of the Church in Rome. As Dr. Gray noted, “It’s beautiful that [St. Pudentiana’s is] a humble, simple Church because that’s who Christ called—a humble, simple, meek fisherman from Galilee.”
The Romans mastered the art of integrating conquered peoples into their empire while allowing them to retain their identities and culture. In the case of the Jewish people and other religious sects, the Romans respected tradition and allowed these people to continue practicing their beliefs. As long as the taxes were paid and rebellion was squashed, life went on with relative peace.

While Christianity grew throughout the Empire, but it was not initially welcomed by the Roman people. They looked at the practices of this new faith as something barbaric and scandalous. What else were they to think when followers claimed to eat the body and blood of a God-man? Were they cannibals? Romans were also suspicious of the secretive nature of Christians’ private worship practices, which contrasted the more ostentatious displays of public worship found in the pagan Roman religions. More controversially, these Christians refused to pay homage to Caesar as a divinity. Like the Jews, the Christians believed in only one God, mysteriously united with his Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They would worship none other.

The Romans believed this new faith to be a perversion of tradition and an affront to the unity of the empire. Tension mounted in 64 AD when a great fire broke out in Rome, destroying three quarters of the city. Emperor Nero, who many believed started the fire, placed the blame on the disliked Christian community. Whether this was the cause of the first organized persecution of the Christians or the occasion for it, we may never know. What we can deduce is that Nero needed to placate the anger of a suffering people and get rid of what he believed were religious dissenters.

The accounts of the Neronian persecution reveal horrific cases of violence and bloodshed. Martyrs were covered in animal skins and thrown to hungry dogs. Some were bathed in pitch or resin, nailed to posts, and burned alive as human torches. Others were shot at with arrows, or mangled by lions in the arena. As arrests and martyrdoms increased, the Christians in Rome pleaded with Peter to flee. He consented, leaving Rome by night on the Via Appia (the Appian Way).

According to tradition, Peter departed the city, he saw a man coming toward him, bent under the weight of what he carried. As Peter’s eyes adjusted in the night, he recognized the man—the same man that had called to him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, that spoke parables of the Kingdom of God, that met his gaze in the courtyard outside the high priest’s tribunal after he had denied the man three times. It was Jesus.
Peter was startled, seeing Jesus carrying not provisions or a pack but a Cross. “Domine, quo vadis?”—“Lord, where are you going?” Peter asked breathlessly. “I am going to Rome to be crucified again,” Jesus responded. On this dark night on the outskirts of Rome, Peter now recalled the night at Gethsemane when Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Looking into the face of Christ and hearing his response, Peter knew that God wanted him to return to Rome, even if what lay ahead was the Via Crucis, the Way of the Cross.

The Church of Domine Quo Vadis (also known as the Church of St. Mary in Palmis) sits along the old Appian Way and recalls Peter’s encounter with Jesus. At the back of the church are two paintings facing each other. On the left St. Peter stands on the stone street of the Appian Way holding the keys given him by Christ and asking “Domine, quo vadis?” On the right is Jesus, standing on the stone pavement, pointing Peter back to Rome. On either side of the altar are two more paintings. To the right of the altar is Jesus on the Cross. On the left is Peter, hanging upside down on his own cross, obedient to his Lord to the end.

Tradition tells us that Mark was with Peter in Rome. Peter himself mentions Mark by name in his first letter, referring to Mark as “my son” (see 1 Peter 5:13). Early Church Fathers also refer to Mark as the disciple and interpreter of Peter who hands down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. In his gospel, Mark highlights the theme of “The Way.” Look up Mark 8:27-33, noticing the use of the phrase “on the way” at the beginning of this passage. What does “The Way” of Christ entail, according to these verses? What does Peter’s return to Rome signify concerning this theme of “The Way”? How has Peter changed since Mark 8:32?

Now turn to Mark 9:30-35. How does the theme of “The Way” continue here? What teaching does Christ impart to his followers in this excerpt?

The theme of “The Way” continues into Mark 10:46-52. In this passage, what is the significance of the healing of the blind man? What does he do after he is healed? How can this narrative be related to the story of Peter on “The Way”?

Each of us is called to follow Jesus on “The Way” in our own life. Take a moment in prayer to ask Jesus, “Which way, Lord, do you want me to go?” in the situations of your own life today.
Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus spoke of the death by which Peter was to glorify God saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go” (John 21:18). Tradition tells us that Peter was martyred during the Neronian persecution, c. 64-67. Since he was not a Roman citizen, Peter was crucified (as compared to St. Paul who, because he was a Roman citizen, was beheaded by the sword).

The following is a segment from an ancient document called The Acts of Peter that includes an account of Peter’s martyrdom. This document, written before 200 AD, is helpful for envisioning Peter’s death, though it is not considered Sacred Scripture.

“And having approached and standing by the cross he [Peter] began to say: O name of the cross, thou hidden mystery! O grace ineffable that is pronounced in the name of the cross! O nature of man, that cannot be separated from God! O love unspeakable and inseparable, that cannot be shown forth by unclean lips! I seize thee now, I that am at the end of my delivery hence (or, of my coming hither). I will declare thee, what thou art: I will not keep silence of the mystery of the cross which of old was shut and hidden from my soul. Let not the cross be unto you which hope in Christ, this which appeareth: for it is another thing, different from that which appeareth, even this passion which is according to that of Christ.”

Compare this account to Peter’s discussion of suffering in his writings. Look up 1 Peter 3:14-15 and 1 Peter 4:12-14. What is Peter’s understanding of the role of the Cross for discipleship?

Below is another excerpt from The Acts of Peter in which Peter directs his flock. Imagine you are witnessing the scene below as it occurs within Nero’s circus. Where are you in the scene? Sitting next to the Emperor? Standing in chains next to Peter? Making sure the prisoners are well secured? What role do you play? What do his words stir within you?

“And now above all, because ye that can hear are able to hear it of me, that am at the last and final hour of my life, hearken: Separate your souls from everything that is of the senses, from everything that appeareth, and does not exist in truth. Blind these eyes of yours, close these ears of yours, put away your doings that are seen; and ye shall perceive that which concerneth Christ, and the whole mystery of your salvation: and let thus much be said unto you that hear, as if it had not been spoken. But now it is time for thee, Peter, to deliver up thy body unto them that take it. Receive it then, ye unto whom it belongeth. I beseech you the executioners, crucify me thus, with the head downward and not otherwise: and the reason wherefore, I will tell unto them that hear.”
How does Peter direct his flock in the excerpt above? What direction does Peter give in 1 Peter 4:1-2, 2 Peter 1:5-8, and 2 Peter 3:11-14? Is Peter’s advice still relevant today?

Tradition tells us that Peter was martyred in Nero’s private circus. As noted in the above account, Peter was crucified with his head downward, by his own choice, because he didn’t feel worthy to suffer in the same manner as his Lord. Peter’s body was quickly buried in the cemetery near the circus on the Vatican hill. The site of the martyrdom and burial of this holy Apostle was not to be forgotten by the early Christian Church. Early in Church history the site was venerated as successive generations of Christians suffered their own persecutions and looked to Peter for the strength to remain faithful to the end.

The simple memorial that marked the grave of Peter for the first 200 years after his death would give way to a magnificent basilica built by the emperor Constantine. Construction began on what is now referred to as Old St. Peter’s Basilica, and its location was set so that it would be built on top of the existing memorial of Peter’s grave. By the end of the 15th century, when this first basilica looked as though it might collapse, Bramante and, later, Michelangelo would assist in the rebuilding of the current basilica so that the high altar would be positioned directly over the previous altar and the grave of St. Peter.

The tradition that Peter’s grave laid beneath the high altar in St. Peter’s Basilica was handed down through the centuries. During a small renovation in the mid-twentieth century, workers discovered a series of tombs, which with more digging revealed an ancient necropolis (city of the dead, as ancient cemeteries were often referred to) complete with walls, streets, benches, funerary monuments, etc. beneath the grotto level of St. Peter’s Basilica. Pope Pius XII authorized a full-scale archaeological excavation of the area, which concluded with the finding of the bones of a man in the ancient memorial/trophy directly underneath the altar. The bones were dated back to the first century—Peter’s remains. Interestingly, they could not find the feet of the man among the bones, given Peter’s request to be crucified upside down, his feet, nailed high upon his cross, were likely cut off to remove the body quickly from the cross.

Like Christ before him, Peter was crucified and died. But, because of Christ, death itself could not maintain its hold over him. As St. Paul says,

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” —Romans 8:35-39
In Peter’s role as head of the Apostles, one title is central: Shepherd. Peter and his successors live out this role in a specific and profound way. Far from being a random description of the pope, being a shepherd has deep roots in Sacred Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments.

Shepherding was central to the lives of God’s people. Many of the patriarchs and leading figures in the Old Testament were shepherds: Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Amos. In fact, when Jacob and his sons traveled to Egypt to escape the famine in the Land of Canaan, Pharaoh inquires, “What is your occupation?” to which they respond, “Your servants are shepherds, as our fathers were” (Genesis 47:3). Since God’s people knew the “ins and outs” of shepherding and what it entailed, it’s not surprising that this became a metaphor used to describe the relationship of God with his people. An example of this imagery occurs already in the book of Genesis. Look up Genesis 49:24. How is God described?

The image of shepherding deepens throughout the Old Testament. God is seen as the good and trustworthy Shepherd who guided his sheep out of slavery in Egypt, and who with the giving of his Commandments and Law created gateposts for his flock to direct them to find blessing.

Look up the following Old Testament passages. What kind of shepherd does each passage describe God as being? What characteristics are noted?

Psalm 23

Psalm 80:1-3

Isaiah 40:11

Micah 2:12

Look up the following Old Testament passages. How are God’s people described?

Psalm 74:1

Psalm 95:7
While God was Israel’s true Shepherd who watched over, protected, and provided for his people, he also chose leaders who would shepherd his people on earth. Look up the following passages. Who is appointed as shepherd over God’s people in each passage?

Numbers 27:15-18

2 Samuel 7:7

2 Samuel 5:1-2

In addition to the patriarchs, judges, and kings, the priests of the Old Covenant were also considered shepherds of God’s people. The priests, in particular, were directly appointed by God to instruct and lead the flock toward holiness by upholding the Law, participating in worship, and maintaining fidelity to God alone. Sadly, many who were called to keep Israel on God’s chosen path went astray themselves. And as the shepherds strayed, so did the sheep. Eventually God severely chastises those who were supposed to be shepherding his people. Look up the following passages. What is the message God has for these unworthy shepherds? What will God do to correct the harm they have done?

Jeremiah 23:1-4

Ezekiel 34

The theme of shepherding comes to fulfillment in the New Testament with the coming of the Good Shepherd himself: Jesus Christ. At the birth of Christ, it is the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem who are the first to hear the good news about a savior being born (see Luke 2:8-20). Later, when Jesus begins his ministry of preaching and teaching, he remarks that the crowds are “like sheep without a shepherd” (see Mark 6:34), which recalls God’s chastisement of the unworthy shepherds who had fed themselves while leaving the sheep to be scattered.

In John’s gospel, God’s promise that he himself would gather his flock is fulfilled when Jesus announces that he is the Good Shepherd. Look up John 10:11-18. How does Jesus describe himself? What will he do for his sheep?

Not only does Jesus fulfill God’s promise to gather his flock to himself, but he also fulfills the promise to give his people new shepherds. Jesus establishes his Church upon Peter and the Apostles. In John 20, after the Apostles have caught a great number of fish at Jesus’ command and shared a breakfast of fish and bread, Jesus directs his attention to Peter.
Look up John 21:15-19. What question is Peter asked three times? What command is Peter given three times?

In John 10:11, Jesus said he was the Good Shepherd. Now after his resurrection and before he ascends into heaven, Jesus is passing his Shepherd’s staff to Peter. But before he does he asks him if he is ready: Does he love Christ before all else? Will he feed and tend Christ’s flock, and even be willing to lay down his life?

The role of shepherding established by Jesus through Peter and the Apostles continues to this day. As the Catechism states,

“Just as the office which the Lord confided to Peter alone, as first of the apostles, destined to be transmitted to his successors, is a permanent one, so also endures the office, which the apostles received, of shepherding the Church, a charge destined to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of bishops...” —CCC 862

An outward sign of the office of shepherding is seen each year when, on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, June 29th, the Holy Father places the pallium—a circular narrow band or yoke made of sheep’s wool—on each new archbishop who has been named in the previous year. It is a symbol that the archbishop is “yoked” with the bishop of Rome and shares in his care for Christ’s flock. In a beautiful tradition, the wool for the pallium is obtained from sheep kept in the area where St. Paul was martyred, and then on the eve of the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul the pallium is placed on St. Peter’s tomb until the next day’s liturgy.

The image of the shepherd is a wonderful symbol of the gift that Jesus has given the Church in the office of apostle—in particular, the office of the head apostle, the pope. As we approach the close of our study on St. Peter, take some time today to pray for the pope and for your bishop, that God may pour out on them the graces they need to be faithful and follow in the footsteps of Peter.

St. Peter, pray for them.

St. Peter, pray for us.
The Apostles Peter and Paul are often paired together in the Catholic artistic tradition of Rome. In 1600 AD Caravaggio was commissioned to create a pair of paintings depicting Rome’s two apostolic patrons for the Cerasi Chapel, a side chapel of the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. Caravaggio depicted the two apostles, but in different moments of their ministry. Paul is shown in his first moments of faith, on the road to Damascus. Peter is seen in his last moments, being crucified for his faith by the Romans.

A generation earlier Michelangelo had created a similar pair of paintings, which undoubtedly influenced Caravaggio. The stage for Michelangelo’s paintings was the Pauline Chapel, a private but sizable chapel of the Holy Father in the Vatican Palace. Though Caravaggio’s stage was a much more intimately sized chapel, its location in the popular Church of Santa Maria del Popolo meant his work was to have a much larger and more varied audience.

Covering more than ten times the area of Caravaggio’s painting, Michelangelo gives us a scene including not just St. Peter and his executioners but also a great crowd of spectators set against a vast landscape. Apart from his white beard, Peter is not presented as an aged fisherman, but as a muscular hero in the Classical style. Michelangelo has Peter’s face turned directly to the viewer. With its location in the Pauline Chapel, that viewer is often the current successor to St. Peter.
Thus, Peter’s direct gaze asks, “Are you also willing to take on the yoke of the shepherd of Christ’s flock? Are you willing to lay down your life for the sheep?”

While Caravaggio echoes several aspects of Michelangelo’s work, he does so with the Baroque emphasis on realism, with its exaggerated use of movement and light. In the intimacy of the Cerasi Chapel, Caravaggio has replaced Michelangelo’s crowd and landscape with a close-up view of St. Peter in the last moments of his life. It is an intensely personal encounter. The realism is palpable. Caravaggio depicts Peter as the aging Apostle that he was—strong, but not the muscular hero of Michelangelo’s work. Peter looks like any man (since Caravaggio’s model was a man from the street). Details of the scene seem to spill out from the canvas—the soiled feet of the executioner, the foot of Peter’s cross as it splits the painting using a sharp diagonal line, the red robe of the left most executioner—reaching to the very edge and beyond into the space of the chapel. The viewer can’t help but be drawn closer to the action of the scene, so close as to see the nails clearly piercing Peter’s feet and hands.

The three executioners strain with all their might to raise the cross into place. But, for all their exertion, they seem no match compared to the weight of the cross—as if Peter, the rock of Christ’s Church, is a force greater than any normal human. Peter’s body, now given as a sacrifice to God, is strikingly illumined. And if we were standing in the chapel, we could trace the light back to its source in the small dome of the anteroom ahead of the chapel. There we would see the dove of the Holy Spirit in the heavens, the Holy Spirit who inspired Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, who emboldened Peter at Pentecost, and who directed him in leading Christ’s Church. It is this same Holy Spirit who now sustains him in this final witness to Christ.

We cannot see the faces of the three executioners. Their backs are to us, or shadows conceal their faces. Peter’s is the only face we see, calm and serene, without the panic or fear one would expect from a tortured victim. While Peter leans up to look out from his cross, his gaze is not focused on the viewer. Rather, given the painting’s location in the chapel, his eyes look to the altar where Christ becomes present in the Eucharist and where Christ dwells in the Real Presence in the tabernacle. It is as if Peter’s gaze is meant to direct the viewer to Christ and his sacraments, reminding us that those are the source from which we, too, will find the courage to lay down our lives for Christ and his Church.

Caravaggio’s dramatic painting of the Crucifixion of St. Peter rivets the viewer’s eyes upon the suffering of the Apostle. It draws us closer, into the chapel. It draws us to the altar where we, too, can receive Christ and, like Peter, be filled with the light and grace to remain faithful to the end.

As we come to the close of our study on St. Peter, it’s a good time to reflect over these ten sessions and all that we have learned. At the beginning of our study we listed out what we knew about Peter. Take a moment to look back at the things you noted about St. Peter on page 10. What would you change or add to that list? Having spent these last ten sessions taking a closer look at Peter’s life, what lessons have you learned from this “model disciple” that will help you more closely follow Jesus along “the Way of Christ and the Cross”? 

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Take a moment to journal your ideas, questions, or insights about this lesson. Write down thoughts you had that may not have been mentioned here. List any personal applications you got from the lessons. What challenged you the most in the teachings? How might you turn what you’ve learned into specific action?
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