

LOVE IN THE HEART OF THE CHURCH: AN EXEGETICAL ESSAY ON THE PETER FRAGMENT (JOHN 21:15-19)

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Introduction

“Do you love me?...Tend my sheep.” These were the first words uttered by Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome and the 265th successor of St. Peter, during his homily¹ at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Manila during his apostolic visit to the Philippines on January 16, 2015 with the theme “Mercy and Compassion.” This Bible verse comes from the Gospel reading of Jn 21:15-19 where Jesus would ask Peter this question for three times and entrust to him the care of his flock. The Pope reminded the bishops, priests, and religious of the country of our fundamental vocation to be, in the words of St Thérèse of Lisieux, “the love in heart of the Church.” The pope emphasized that “all pastoral ministry is born of love.”²

Liturgically, the passage of Jn 21:15-19 is used as the Gospel reading for the third Sunday of Easter (Year C), Friday of the 7th Week of Easter, the vigil for the Solemnity of Peter and Paul; and one of the possible readings for the Common of Pastors (for a Pope), the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and during the Masses for special occasions (for the Church, and for Priests).

With his apostolic visit to the Philippines from January 15-19, 2015, Pope Francis became the third pope to have visited the country after Pope St. Paul VI (November 27-29, 1970) and Pope St. John Paul II (February 17-22, 1981 for the

¹ See Francis, *Homily during the Eucharistic Celebration with Bishops, Priests and Religious at the Manila Cathedral* (16 January 2015).

² Ibid.

beatification of Lorenzo Ruiz and companion martyrs; and January 12-16, 1995 for the World Youth Day 1995 Manila and the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the first ecclesiastical provinces in the Philippines). Pope Francis' visit to the Philippines is also largest papal event in history with an estimated 6-7 million attendees during the final Mass at Rizal Park in Manila. This overwhelming number of people is an expression of the love of the Filipino people for the Bishop of Rome. One of the fruits of this apostolic visit is the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy of 2016 which was first announced on March 13, 2015, barely two months after he returned back to Rome.

The main objective of this article is to offer an exegesis of Jn 21:15-19 and to understand its significance and implications in our theological understanding of Peter's pastoral role and the primacy of Peter's successors, the Bishop of Rome, in a synodal Church. Since the publication of John Paul II's encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* ("That they may be one")³ on the Church's commitment to ecumenism, there have been major efforts made to foster open and genuine dialogue among the different Christian churches. The involvement of these churches in the ongoing synodal process is a sign of hope and progress towards greater cooperation and full communion.

Textual Basis

The textual basis of the exegetical essay is the canonical text of the *Greek New Testament*, prepared by an interconfessional and international committee and published by the United Bible Societies (1966; 3d ed. corrected, 1983; information concerning changes to be introduced into the critical apparatus of the forthcoming 4th edition was available to the Committee) as translated in the Catholic edition of the *New Revised Standard*

³ See John Paul II, Encyclical Letter On commitment to Ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint* (*UUS*) (25 May 1995).

Version (NRSV) of the Bible.⁴ The *NRSV* is a truly ecumenical translation produced by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish scholars. As in that edition, double brackets are used to enclose few passages that are generally regarded as later additions to the text, but which were retained because of their evident antiquity and their importance in the textual tradition.

The choice of utilizing the *NRSV* for this exegetical essay above the other translations of the more recent *New American Bible Revised Edition* and the richly footnoted and annotated *New Jerusalem Bible* is a result of a comparative analysis of the translations which revealed the *NRSV* translation situated in between the two other translations with some elements similar to one or the other. The *NRSV* is also the preferred translation of most contemporary theologians and Bible scholars with the Pope emeritus Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) and Francis J. Moloney, SDB, author of *The Gospel of John*, the fourth volume of the *Sacra Pagina Series*,⁵ as prominent representatives. It is also the preferred version used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Delimitation and Context

Delimitation of the Text

The textual unit selected is located at the heart of John's epilogue and forms part of the Galilean post-resurrection appearance of Jesus.⁶ The pericope begins with a time indication, "When they had finished breakfast" (v. 15a). This verse provides a link with the previous narrative on Jesus' appearance to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. The

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture texts in this work are taken from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Catholic Edition (Makati City: St Pauls, 2006).

⁵ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

⁶ It is only in John's gospel, that we find a record of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus both in Jerusalem (ch. 20) and Galilee (ch. 21).

pericope is sometimes referred to as the “Peter fragment,”⁷ distinguishing it from the “disciple pericope” (vv.1-14) which precedes it.⁸ It narrates the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Sometimes, the pericope is extended to include vv. 21-24 because it continues the conversation between Jesus and Peter. But since the focus of the discussion now shifts to the future of the beloved disciple rather than on the role of Peter, I have decided to limit my exegetical study to the exchange between Jesus and Peter regarding his rehabilitation, pastoral role and martyrdom. The pericope ends with the invitation to discipleship of Jesus to Peter, “Follow me” (v. 19b).

Context

The Peter fragment advances the Galilean post-resurrection appearance narrative of Jesus and focuses on the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. According to Brown, “many scholars believe that the link between the Peter fragment and the disciple pericope is merely artificial and not necessarily temporal.”⁹ We also find a shift from the fish symbolism in vv. 1-14 to the sheep symbolism in vv. 15-19. Thus, the Peter fragment may be read as an independent textual unit distinct from the preceding verses of chapter 21. It is also the final Johannine dialogue which explores the role of the future leaders and members of the Church.

Synoptic Parallels

The account of the post-resurrection rehabilitation, commission and vocation of Peter is a unique Johannine material inasmuch as it is only in John that we find an appearance of the risen Jesus in Galilee. However, the Peter fragment reminds us of the initial call of Peter located in the

⁷ Henceforth, I shall be referring to the pericope of Jn 21:15-19 as Peter fragment.

⁸ See Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 558

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XII-XXI)*, vol. 29A, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1102.

beginning of the Gospels (Mt 4:18-22, Mk 1:16-20, Lk 5:1-11 and Jn 1:37-42) and his confession and commissioning as the Church's solid foundation recorded by the Synoptics after his confession of faith (Mt 16:13-20, Mk 8:27-30 and Lk 9:18-20). The pericope is also understood in the context of Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial (Mt 26:31-35, Mk 14:27-31, Lk 22:21-23 and Jn 13:36-38) and Peter's actual denial of Jesus during the Jewish trial (Mt 26:69-75, Mk 14:66-72, Lk 22:54-62 and Jn 18:17-27).

Literary Structure – A General Outline of the Passage

The Peter fragment records the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. The Gospel of John is replete with many dialogues and this particular dialogue is the last dialogue which no longer principally focuses on the identity and mission of Jesus but rather on the identity and mission of Peter who would play an essential and pivotal role in the growth and development of the Church. It provides a link between Jesus' identity as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14-18) and Peter's pastoral role in the Church.

The five-verse pericope of the Peter fragment is structured and may be divided into four parts:

1. The introduction and artificial connection: "When they had finished breakfast" (v. 15a)
2. Peter's rehabilitation and commission through his threefold confession of love for Jesus (vv. 15b-17)
3. Jesus' prediction of Peter's martyrdom (vv. 18-19a)
4. The call to discipleship of Peter (v. 19b)

Analysis of the Text

According to Moloney, the Johannine epilogue where we locate the Peter fragment has been "widely regarded as an addition to a Gospel that closed with the author's words to the reader in 20:30-31."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the epilogue has always been part of the Johannine Gospel as is attested by

¹⁰ Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 545.

early witnesses such as P⁶⁶ and Tertullian, and thus must be considered as an integral part of the whole Gospel.¹¹ E.C. Hoskyns argues that the inclusion of chapter 21 is necessary in order to indicate the mission of the disciples to the world for its salvation, similar to the endings we find in the conclusion of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 27:20, Mk 21:20, and the Book of Acts which is the conclusion of Luke's Gospel).¹² The epilogue is important to the first Christians who first wrote and passed down the gospel to later generations. There has also been a question on the designation of the final chapter as an appendix, supplement or epilogue. Most scholars regard chapter 21 as an epilogue since it parallels a literary epilogue which is added after the conclusion of a drama to complete some of the lines of thought left unfinished in the play itself. Moreover, having an epilogue balances the presence of the prologue.

The Setting

The post-resurrectional dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter is set on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. The Sea of Tiberias is a harp-shaped freshwater lake in the district of Galilee in northern Palestine. It has been given different names in the Gospels such as the "Lake Gennesaret" (Lk 5:1) and "Sea of Galilee" (Mt 4:18; 15:29 and Mk 1:16; 7:31).¹³

The Sea of Tiberias, situated in Galilee, derives its name from the city of Tiberias, founded by Herod Antipas in AD 20 and named after the Roman emperor Tiberius. The name of Tiberius is mentioned in the gospel of Luke indicating the temporal context when the preaching of John the Baptist began (Lk 3:1). Reigning from November 16, 42 BC up until his death on March 16 AD 37, Tiberius was the Roman emperor during Jesus' birth, public ministry, death, and resurrection.

¹¹ Brown, *John (XII-XXI)*, 1077.

¹² E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 550.

¹³ See *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1985, s.v. "Galilee, Sea of," 330.

The Sea of Tiberias, identified also as the Sea of Galilee, was first mentioned in the Gospel of John during the multiplication of the bread and the subsequent bread of life discourse (John 6). This creates a spatial link between the multiplication of the bread, the third and central of the seven signs of Jesus during his public ministry, and the abundant catch of fish, the eighth and only sign performed by Jesus after the resurrection. In both cases, the obedience to Jesus' bidding and the agency of the disciples are required for the sign to be performed and thus manifest the divine identity of Jesus.

The redactor's choice of the shores of the Sea of Tiberias is coherent with the promise of Jesus found in Mk 14:28 and 16:7 where Jesus has promised that they will see him in Galilee. Instead, all the other appearances of the risen Christ have been in Jerusalem.

Another salient but important note about the setting is the presence of the "charcoal fire, ἀνθρακιά" (v. 9) which recalls Peter's threefold denial of Jesus in Annas' courtyard, where he stood warming himself by a "charcoal fire" (18:18).¹⁴

Peter's Rehabilitation and Commission

The pastoral role of Peter in the development of the nascent Church is understood against the background of his rehabilitation to discipleship after his fall. The threefold confession of Peter's love which is a reversal of his threefold denial during the trial of Jesus is a necessary condition in the exercise of Peter's role as a pastor and spiritual guide. Peter's rehabilitation is important for the Johannine community because it provides a sense of unity between other Christian communities dispersed during that period. Although the prediction (Mt 26:33-35, Mk 14:29-31, Lk 22:33-34, and Jn 13:36-38) and threefold denial (the first denial is described

¹⁴ Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John: Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 352.

in Lk 22:54-57, the second denial in Mk 14:69-70, and the third denial in Mt 26:73-75 and Lk 22:59-62; the three denials are described in Jn 18:15-27) of Peter are recorded in all the Gospels, we can only find Peter's post-resurrection rehabilitation of the denial in John.

The dialogue between Jesus and Peter is subdivided into three parallel parts of three: (1) the question posed by Jesus to the Peter about the love for him, (2) the affirmative reply of Peter, and (3) the conferring of the precise pastoral task in the Church (vv. 15-17).¹⁵

Peter is referred to by Jesus with his original name and patronymic designation, Simon, son of John. This identification of Peter as "son of John" is unique in the Johannine gospel (1:42, 21:15-17). It is interpreted by some scholars as a suggestion of a less familiar treatment of Jesus to Peter in order to challenge his friendship and making a fresh beginning. The setting, Lake Tiberias in Galilee, also evokes the same idea of going back to the initial encounter with Jesus and the invitation to discipleship. But this return to Peter's initial call has already been shaped and brought to maturation by his personal relationship with Jesus and the events of the Paschal Mystery.

Another debate among scholars are the variations in the Greek vocabulary used in the repetitive verses. There are two different verbs for "to love" (*ἀγαπάω* and *φιλέω*), for "to know" (*οἶδα* and *γινώσκω*), and for "to feed or tend" (*βόσκω* and *ποιμαίνω*), and two different nouns for sheep (*ἀρνίον* and *πρόβατον*). Some commentators see it as bearing specific meaning into the reading of the text like B. F. Wescott who assumed that the changes in the vocabularies for love were deliberate in order to show that Jesus uses a higher term for

¹⁵ Giorgio Zevini, *The Gospel according to John* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2009), 517-518.

love while Peter only lays claim of a natural feeling of love.¹⁶ Thus, we may understand the grief of Peter when Jesus would use the natural feeling of love for his third query. Peter felt that even that form of love is being challenged by Jesus. It is notable that after Peter is hurt (*λυπέω*, grieve, pain) Jesus does not ask again. This verb which described Peter's feelings is the same verb used in John 16:20 when Jesus told his disciples during the last supper discourse, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy." Peter's grief may be traced back to his denials which gave Jesus reasons to doubt the sincerity of his love from him. Benedict XVI sees this play of words between *φιλέω* which means the love of friendship, tender but not all encompassing and *ἀγαπάω* which is love without reserve, total and unconditional as significant in the realization of Peter of his limitation after denying Christ.¹⁷ Peter understood that his poor love is enough for Jesus and Jesus has put himself on the level of Peter. It is from here that trust and a new impetus for a deeper Christian discipleship springs forth. On the other hand, many ancient and modern commentators only regard this use of different verbs as a meaningless stylistic peculiarity.¹⁸ John's use of different words for the same idea is assumed to be simply for stylistic variety.

In the last response of Peter, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (21:17), we are reminded of the omniscient character of the Johannine Jesus. Many times in John, Jesus possesses supernatural knowledge about everything that is happening and is about to happen as recorded in his dialogues with Nathanael (1:43-51), the Samaritan Woman (4:1-26) and others.

¹⁶ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: the authorised version with introduction and notes* (London: Murray, 1892), 302-303.

¹⁷ See Benedict XVI, *The Apostles* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), 53.

¹⁸ See Brown, *John (XII-XXI)*, 1102-1103.

The exasperated response of Peter may refer also to his acknowledgement that even his denials are known to Jesus and at the same time it may be and considered as an appeal to Jesus to restore the familiarity between them.¹⁹

Jesus' Prediction of Peter's Martyrdom

After the threefold confession of Peter's love, Jesus would indicate the future martyrdom of Peter. According to tradition and as recorded by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, Peter was crucified upside down during the Christian persecution under Emperor Nero at the time of the Great Fire of Rome around the year 64.²⁰ It is clear that the redactor knew that Peter suffered martyrdom. The death of Peter parallels that of Jesus' own death on the cross which ultimately glorified God. Peter in the future with the nobility of his old age would be able to accomplish by the grace of God what he was unable to previously do so by self-reliance, being unimpeded by youthful passion. In his first letter, he describes himself as a "witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as partaker in the glory that is to be revealed (1 Pet 5:1)." Alongside, the Crucifixion of Christ and the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, the martyrdom of St. Peter is one of the most famous subjects of religious art which adorn most of the Renaissance churches. One of the most recognizable representations of the Crucifixion of St. Peter was painted by Caravaggio in 1601 for the Cerasi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.

This prediction of Peter's martyrdom also brings into front the image of the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. The final words of the pericope, "Follow me," involves a total and full commitment of following Jesus even to the point of giving one's life at the cross. According to Francis Martin and William Wright, with this command, "Jesus emphasizes that Peter's own relationship with him as a disciple lies at the

¹⁹ Ibid., 1106.

²⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.1.2.

heart of his role as shepherd."²¹ Peter who is now restored and to whose care the sheep were entrusted would once again leave everything in order to follow Jesus wherever he goes.

This didactic story draws on the Good Shepherd (10:1-6, 11-18) and the love commandments (13:14-15, 34; 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:12-14), all of which portray the full expression of love as laying down one's life for others. Peter is now rehabilitated, and the story ends with Jesus uttering the invitation and command of discipleship found in Mark 1:17 and 2:17: "Come, follow me!" Martin and Wright declares that, "[a]t the heart of both discipleship and leadership in the Church is a personal love for Jesus."²² This personal love for Jesus is that which will sustain Peter in his mission of evangelization. This personal love for Jesus will eventually strengthen Peter as he faces his own martyrdom which will bear witness to the reality of the Risen Christ and give glory to God. On the site of Peter's martyrdom now stands the Papal Basilica of St. Peter, a place of pilgrimage for many Christians throughout the centuries in order to venerate and ask the intercession of St. Peter.

Theological Implications

The Peter fragment provides a vision of leadership and care for the Church. It is rooted in the portrayal of God as a Shepherd of his people (Ps 23, 77:20; Ezek 34) and of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1ff, 26ff; Hb 13:20; 1 Pt 2:25).²³ In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, St. John Paul II reminds us that "Jesus conferred on Peter and the Twelve entirely special powers with regard to the future of the community and the evangelization of all people"²⁴

²¹ Martin and Wright IV, *John*, 353.

²² Ibid.

²³ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 666.

²⁴ John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) (25 March 1992), no.14.

keeping in mind that “their mission is not theirs but is the same mission of Jesus.”²⁵

Peter’s pastoral role and subsequent martyrdom is radically founded in his total and exclusive love for Jesus which is now translated into his love for the flock. He is aware of his own fragility but he also knew that he could rely on the presence of the Risen Christ beside him. Peter ranks after Jesus as the best known and most frequently figure cited in the New Testament writings. St. Augustine points out that the threefold confession of Peter’s love for Jesus indicates his primacy among the apostles and his role to represent the Church’s unity. He writes,

Rightly then did the Lord after his resurrection entrust Peter with the feeding of his sheep. Yet he was not the only disciple to merit the feeding of the Lord’s sheep; but Christ in speaking only to one suggests the unity of all; and so he speaks to Peter, because Peter is the first among the apostles. Therefore do not be disheartened, Peter; reply once, reply twice, reply a third time. The triple confession of your love is to regain what was lost three times by your fear. You must loose three times what you bound three times; untie by love that which your fear bound. Once, and again, and a third time did the Lord entrust his sheep to Peter.²⁶

John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* reminds us that:

Associating himself [the Bishop of Rome] with Peter’s threefold profession of love, which corresponds to the earlier threefold denial, his Successor knows that he must be a sign of mercy. His is a ministry of mercy, born of an act of Christ’s own mercy. This

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Augustine, *Sermo* 295, 1-2, 4, 7-8; PL 38, 1348-1352.

whole lesson of the Gospel must be constantly read anew, so that the exercise of the Petrine ministry may lose nothing of its authenticity and transparency.²⁷

As shepherd, Peter's authority is not absolute. Jesus remains the chief Shepherd even when he entrusts their care to Peter. According to Benedict XVI, "Peter is very clearly being appointed as the shepherd of Jesus' sheep and established in Jesus' office as shepherd."²⁸ It must also be noted that Jesus does not merely identify himself as the Good Shepherd but also the "door of the sheep" (Jn 10:7). Thus, it is through this "door" that Peter enters. He comes to the sheep "through Jesus."

This pericope has also been used as one of the biblical basis for the primacy of Peter. Our current understanding of Peter's primacy comes from Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* ("the Light of the Nations"). In the third chapter of the document on the hierarchical structure of the Church and in particular on the Episcopate, the council explains that:

For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers, who are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation.

This Sacred Council, following closely in the footsteps of the First Vatican Council, with that Council teaches and declares that Jesus Christ, the eternal Shepherd, established His holy Church,

²⁷ *UUS*, no. 93.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday Publication, 2007), 277.

having sent forth the apostles as He Himself had been sent by the Father; and He willed that their successors, namely the bishops, should be shepherds in His Church even to the consummation of the world. And in order that the episcopate itself might be one and undivided, He placed Blessed Peter over the other apostles, and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion.²⁹

In Peter, we find the living and visible Christ's solicitous love for his people. The understanding of the primacy of Peter has had its long history of theological debate. Springing from Vatican II, the Church now understands the Petrine ministry as a ministry of communion for ecumenical dialogue.³⁰ Peter must be the custodian of communion with Christ for all time. He is responsible for guaranteeing the communion with Christ with the love of Christ, guiding people to fulfill this love in everyday life.³¹

The liturgy also speaks of Peter's primacy during the celebrations of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul (June 28) and the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter (February 22). During the Mass of the Day for Easter Sunday, the Mass celebrated in the Vatican by the Pope includes, as part of the Initial Rites, the singing of the chant, *Petrus, resurrectionis testis* ("Peter, witness to the resurrection") by the deacon. And as the words *Surrexit Dominus vere et apparuit Simoni* ("Yes it is true. The Lord is risen and has appeared to Simon") is chanted, the deacon turns to the pope, and the other deacons open the icon of the Risen Christ. It is then followed by a brief moment of veneration.

²⁹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (LG) (18 November 1965), no. 18.

³⁰ Hermann J. Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I and II* (New York: Herder and Herder Book, 1998), 129-130.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *The Apostles*, 58.

The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity published on June 13, 2024 a study document entitled *The Bishop of Rome. Primacy and synodality in ecumenical dialogues and responses to the encyclical Ut Unum Sint*. This study document presents for the first time a synthesis of the responses to the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and of the ecumenical dialogues on primacy and synodality. The Peter fragment and Matt 16:17-19, have been acknowledged as the “Petrine texts” used as Scriptural foundations in order to foster ecumenical dialogue and understand the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter.³² Historically, these Petrine texts have become an obstacle to unity among Christians. But after years of dialogue, “Catholics have also been challenged to recognize and avoid an anachronistic projection of all doctrinal and institutional developments concerning papal ministry into the ‘Petrine texts’, and to rediscover a diversity of images, interpretations and models in the New Testament.”³³ A diversity of images, interpretations and models of Peter in the New Testament have been rediscovered, while biblical notions such as *episkopè* (the ministry of oversight), *diakonia*, and the concept of “Petrine function,” have helped develop a more comprehensive understanding of the “Petrine texts.”

Conclusion

The reflections on the rehabilitation, commission and vocation of Peter remain essential for the leaders and future leaders of the Church. Peter was chosen by the Lord to take care of his sheep not because of his personal strengths and abilities but rather because he himself has experienced the great mercy which comes from Christ and thus enabled him to let this mercy flow through the people he ministered to. Ministers and future pastors of the Church must gaze at the example of Peter who

³² See Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Study Document *The Bishop of Rome. Primacy and synodality in ecumenical dialogues and responses to the encyclical Ut Unum Sint* (13 June 2024), no. 34-39.

³³ *Ibid.*, no. 36.

in spite of and through his weaknesses and failings was able to experience God's boundless mercy and thus became a vessel through which this mercy flows to all God's people. Peter is the love in the heart of the Church. Through Peter's pastoral charity, he shared in the mission of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

For us Salesians, this call to pastoral charity becomes more vital as we see how Don Bosco, who was deeply devoted to Peter and his successors, practiced it and handed it down as a patrimony to his sons. According to the 10th article of the Salesian Constitutions, the Salesian spirit is "summed up and centered in pastoral charity... It is an apostolic impetus that makes us seek souls and serve God alone."³⁴ And the commitment of the Salesians towards the pope is inscribed in the 13th article where the Salesians expresses our sense of belonging to the Church through "an attitude of filial loyalty to Peter's successor and his teaching, and in our efforts to live in communion and collaboration with the bishops, clergy, religious and laity."³⁵

Don Bosco himself published in 1867 a small booklet on the life of St. Peter in honor of the anniversary of Peter's martyrdom declared by Pope Pius IX. The Peter fragment was reflected upon in chapters 9 and 10 of the booklet.³⁶ The following year 1868, he also published a booklet on the lives of the popes from St. Peter to Pius IX.³⁷ The monumental sign of Don Bosco's love for the pope is the construction of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. Upon the request of Pope Leo

³⁴ See Salesian Society of St. John Bosco, *Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*, 3rd ed. (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2015), art. 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 13.

³⁶ Giovanni Bosco, *Il centenario di S. Pietro Apostolo colla vita del medesimo principe degli apostoli ed un triduo in preparazione della festa dei santi apostoli Pietro e Paolo* (Turin, Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, 1867), 50-63.

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, *I Papi da S. Pietro a Pio IX. Fatti Storici* (Turin, Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, 1868).

XIII, Don Bosco undertook the arduous task of constructing the basilica in order to promote the cult of the Sacred Heart in obedience to the wishes of the pope. The basilica was finally consecrated on May 14, 1887 by Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Lucido Maria Parrocchi with Don Bosco in attendance. This would be Don Bosco's last visit to the City of Sts. Peter and Paul.

I would like to end this exegetical essay with the words of one of the Greek fathers of the Church, Romanus Melodus, found in his *Kontakion on the Mission of the Apostles*. May this serve as a reminder that primary vocation of a pastor is to be the love in the heart of the Church.

Peter, look to me as to how you educate;
remembering your own fall, sympathize with all;
Mindful of the maiden who caused your fall,
do not be harsh;
If conceit attacks you, hear the sound of the cock's crow.
And remember the tears with whose streams
I washed you,
I who alone know what is in your heart.
Peter, do you love me? Feed my flock,
and love those whom I love,
sympathizing with sinners.
Heed my mercy to you,
since I received you who had thrice denied me.
You have a thief as gatekeeper of Paradise
to give you courage.
Send him those whom you wish. Because of you,
Adam turned to me
Saying, "O Creator grant to me
the robber as gatekeeper,
and Cephas as keeper of keys.
Thou who alone dost know what is in the heart."³⁸

³⁸ Romanus Melodus, "Kontakion on the Mission of the Apostles," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 388.