

Fr. John's Homily for August 27, 2023 - 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

JMJ CHS

Props: Shells: nautilus, St. James with cord, crucifix,  
Rocks: Puddingstone, Medjugorje, Caesarea Philippi  
Rosaries: Aaron's, Sue's, Richard's, Joe's  
Magnifying glass

In our lives, we collect stuff. Some of our stuff can be called souvenirs or mementos and can have a special meaning for us. Maybe some are gifts, others are some things that we pick up ourselves. Some examples. Don't we all collect seashells? We walk along the beach and we see something that catches our eye, and we pocket it and find a place for it.

Here are a few of mine. I actually use this one. It has a dual purpose. It is a neck piece that I put on and the feast of St. James. At Santiago de Compostela, his shrine in Spain, he is depicted with a seashell around his neck. And I also use it at baptisms. Here's one I found down in Florida on the beach. It's the *sea cross* or crucifix shell. Actually, it is not a shell but part of the skeleton of a fish. And we are all familiar with the famous *Chambered Nautilus*.

They say that "*the heavens proclaim the glory of God*" but I say that all you have to do is look down and see God's handiwork in things in the water, or on the ground. So, the same goes for rocks. Here's one that was given to me just last week. It is called a *Puddingstone* and it was made into a pendant. It is said that you can find a lot of them on the beaches of Drummond Island up north. This one was taken from the mountain of Medjugorje, the Marian apparition site over in the former Yugoslavia. One of my favorite stones is this one right here which is related to today's homily. A gift to me from one of our parishioners who visited Israel north of the Sea of Galilee. It is even engraved: *Caesarea, Philippi. 2014*. It is from the site of a giant rock cliff and I think we could confidently say that Jesus stood in close proximity to this little rock.

I have also collected a lot of Rosaries over the years. This simple black Rosary I believe belonged to my dad. This one to my mom. I gave it to her as a Mother's Day gift when I was a little boy, and I reclaimed it when she died. This *Divine Mercy Rosary* was made by former parishioner, Sue Ciolek. She has a great devotion to God's Mercy and I use it whenever I say the Chaplet. We will be praying for Sue a little later on in the intercessions because she is currently contending with a mysterious health problem. Now this heavy duty Rosary was handmade by young Aaron Decker, one of my former altar boys from St. Joseph in Howell. Aaron has some claims to fame – he proposed to his wife in the former Adoration Chapel right behind us here. Then he and his wife and family made the cover of *Faith Magazine*. And he and his friends drove for 12 hours from Austria to Rome to attend the funeral of Pope John Paul II. He was pulled out of line and interviewed on international TV. I saw him live.

My favorite Rosary, however, is this one right here. It's the one I carry. This was given to me by Joe Kennedy on the day before he died. It is called the *St. Joseph Rosary* and is from the *Ghirelli* company from their studios in Italy. And it is a mini work of art. It has two medallions on it – there is an image of St. Joseph along with Mary and he is holding the baby Jesus, but he has his hand on top of a small St. Peter's basilica in Rome; the home of the Catholic Universal Church. And there on the back is a passage related to today's Gospel. It is in Latin. We'll get back to that one a little bit later. (Show image of St. Peter, in front of the Basilica named after him.) Now the Crucifix is pretty impressive as well. It has the body of Christ, of course, but there at the top is

the image from today's Gospel – Peter receiving the *Keys to the Kingdom*. And on the back—and I will need a magnifying lens for this—again from today's Gospel, "*Tu es Petrus et super hanc Petram ædificabo Ecclesiam Meum.*" which translated means, "*Thou art Peter and upon this rock, I will build my Church.*"

There are many things we could talk about in today's Gospel and we have many times over the years, as myself and Deacon Jerry have preached on this passage. "*Who do you say that I am?*" was a question asked of the Disciples. We certainly must ask that same question ourselves. Who is Jesus to you? Your answer is supremely important. Or we could speak about Simon Peter himself as our first Pope. There is certainly much we could say about him because he was quite a character. And he really has a big part in *The Chosen*. And then we could do an "*apologetic*". There are many people of the various Christian traditions who do not see Peter as the head of the Universal Church. So this is a good passage to help to begin to make the case that yes, he is, indeed, the representative of Christ on earth. Or we could preach again about the parallels between the rock that I am holding in my hand, the giant rock there at Caesarea Philippi and Peter, who's name means rock.

But today I would like to talk about something else. I would like to focus on two words, the Latin word *Meum* as in *Ecclesiam Meum*. *Meum* means 'My' and *Ecclesium* means 'assembly', or 'Church'. *Upon this rock, I will build..... My Church*. Well, in a sense, I guess this will be an "*apologetic*", that is, a *reasoned explanation and defense of the truth* of the matter regarding the Catholic Church. And we say it is the truth because as we just read, Jesus founded only one church. Not many. And it sure seems as if he put one person at the head of it. Namely, Peter, or as he was originally known in Greek, Cephas, or going back further, in Aramaic, Kepha, which again, means ....rock.

We have grown up in a church where the successors of Peter were, for the most part, Catholic/Christian heroes. The first ones were all martyred. And many of them have been named saints for their teaching, and their preaching and their heroic virtue. But we need to recognize the fact that many of them were scoundrels. There is no other way to put it. We won't go into what kinds of things they did but they were not very nice. And they have made the faith life difficult for us as we try to make sense out of the papacy.

But really all we have to do is go back to Peter himself to get a proper understanding. He must have had some leadership qualities for him to be chosen by God. But then again, Jesus formed him into the man he wanted him to be. He had three years to train Peter and the others to be Disciples, to be men of God and imitators of Himself. But we are all too familiar with Simon Peter's big failure.

Let's say a little bit about that. It actually began at the Last Supper. Peter made his big claim about never leaving or forsaking Jesus. "*I will die for you.*" Jesus knew better (of course) and said, "*Peter, Satan has desired to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail. So when you have turned, that is, when you have repented, you must strengthen your brothers. But, as for tonight, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.*"

Now one of the speakers at the conference we attended over in Mundelein speculated about this scene. Fr. McManus, an exorcist, suggested that Simon Peter may have actually been possessed by the devil that night, just like Judas was. The third time they asked him if he knew Jesus, he got very angry and upset, and it says that he swore an oath. "*I swear to you, I do not know the man.*" In other words, he perjured himself. He lied under an oath. Remember the words used in our courts where a person is sworn in? With their right hand resting on the Bible they say. "I

promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” So you could actually say that Simon Peter broke the second commandment. “*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain.*” So the point is that Peter was a very weak man. But when he heard that cock crow he went off and wept bitterly, and thus was forgiven by the Lord. And not only that, he was allowed to continue as the supreme pontiff, our very first Pope.

We’ve enjoyed a long string of great Popes. Pius XII, the Pope of my childhood, and the hero of World War II, followed by John XXIII, now a saint. Succeeded by another saint, Paul VI, a short, but good run by John Paul I, and then the magnificent reign of St. John Paul II, followed by another great one, Benedict the XVI. And now, we have Pope Francis. Sigh. What can I say? Many very knowledgeable and devout Catholic types have weighed in on the pontificate of the current holy father and have many unkind things to say. And this certainly leaves us in a great quandary, and a dilemma, and we priests are called upon to help you understand what’s going on, and what our attitude should be towards this. Ha, somebody should tell us priests what the heck is going on. Bishop Earl once tried to tell us. He said, “He’s the Pope. What else can we say.”

I would like to share a passage from the 1940s devotional to the Sacred Heart. This is part of our prayers of reparation that we pray here on the third Tuesday after Mass. “*The more Thy Vicar on earth is persecuted, the more we will honor him as the infallible head of thy Holy Church, show our fidelity, and pray for him.*” Well, I admit it, I sometimes choke when I pray those words. But I do say them, and I try to mean what I say. I just have to trust that all the prayers that we pray for him, at every Mass, are heard on high and will be answered in a special way, in God’s good time.

As we wind this down, I will leave you with a little story that would hopefully encourage you to not allow yourself to become discouraged, but to keep plugging away in your Catholic faith. In the 1800s, the chancellor of Prussia asked his head adviser, Otto Von Bismarck, if there was any proof for the existence of God. Bismarck replied, “*The Jews, sir, the Jews.*” There is no natural explanation for how a tiny group of people, twice exiled from their land, and persecuted repeatedly for thousands of years, could still be around today. No, it has to be a supernatural explanation. Well, you know the same applies to the Catholic Church. We, too, have been beaten up many times throughout the many years. Like right now. And we are still around. *We have taken a licking but we keep on ticking.* All according to the great promise found in today’s Gospel.

I return to my favorite Rosary, and again, with a little help from my magnifying glass, I read for you The Promise: “*Non praee valebunt.*” Translated, “...and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” We should send this homily to Francis along with a note, *Dear Holy Father Francis. I am sure you already know that Satan has desired to sift you like wheat. But we here at Holy Spirit Church in Brighton Michigan, have prayed for you today, We have prayed that, if need be, your faith might not fail. And when, if need be, you have turned, you must strengthen your brothers, and sisters. Amen.*

~Fr. John