

## FISHERS OF MEN (John 21:1-19)

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St. Peter's Church in Volo

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In their efforts to totally re-invent Jesus of Nazareth some of our modern biblical scholars and theologians have claimed that Jesus didn't really know who He was, that His miracles weren't really miracles, just fabrications of the first Christians or that Jesus didn't really found a Church and that He never made Peter head of it. Some even claim that perhaps Jesus didn't really rise from the dead and even if He did, it really wasn't important anyway.

Today's post-Resurrection account flies in the face of such ridiculous claims and shows that it's the revisionists, who have invented their own church and written their own fantastical accounts of Jesus' life. If the Apostles were a savvy bunch of opportunists as they claim, then one would think that they would have sat down after the death and resurrection of Jesus to plan out a strategy of how they were going to take advantage of the situation and reap optimal benefits from it while the opportunity was ripe. But after their friend and teacher, whom they had accompanied for three years, was apprehended, brutally tortured, crucified and then remarkably rose from the dead, what did they do? They left Jerusalem and went back to Galilee where the leader of this new group said, "I'm going fishing." And the others that were with him decided to join him. That certainly doesn't sound like someone, who wanted to start a new religious movement.

We don't know exactly when the apostles returned to Galilee, nor why. We don't know what was going through their heads. There are many questions that we would like answered. But strict history was not the intent of the evangelists when they wrote their accounts. The gospels convey historical facts but they are not history books as we would understand that concept today. In addition, while conveying historical events, St. John's gospel, in particular, is also a very profound theological text that attempts to tell us not just what Jesus did but also help us understand the great mystery of who He was.

The apostles had probably returned to Galilee because they felt both despondent and lost after the tragic events that had just taken place in Jerusalem. Their friend and teacher had indeed risen from the dead and had appeared to them a number of times, but He wasn't there now to accompany them and tell them what to do. Perhaps, still a bit afraid of the authorities, it could be that they went back to their homeland in Galilee so that they would be far enough away from the Pharisees and scribes, who had sought to kill Jesus, so that they wouldn't attract attention—to "lay low," as we would say. Jesus had spent three years teaching and preparing them as apostles but they were still only simple fishermen. They didn't have their Master anymore. Without Him, they had no clue as to how they were to start proclaiming that the Messiah had come. And they didn't have the courage. So, they returned to what they knew best—fishing.

The apostles have been out on the Sea of Galilee all night, the optimal time for net fishing but had caught nothing. A man on the shore, whom they didn't yet recognize as Jesus told them to cast their nets over the right side of the boat, which in their culture was considered to be the lucky side. So, they probably just thought that the man was just telling them that they might be lucky if they tried that. But when their nets were suddenly

filled with such an enormous quantity of fish, it seemed miraculous. John was the first one to make the connection and realize that it was the Lord.

John records that when they dragged the net in, it contained precisely 153 large fish. And you may wonder why John thought that it was so important to include such an odd detail, but it tells us something very important. Someone, who would have only heard the story second-hand would have said that they caught “a large quantity” of fish. But John was actually there and had witnessed the entire incident and therefore, knew exactly how many fish they had pulled in. That’s why his gospel records the exact number of fish. He repeatedly gives such seemingly insignificant details throughout his gospel showing that he was a witness to everything that he wrote about, giving his gospel great credibility.

Biblical commentators have offered various explanations for the number 153 but perhaps the first of them was St. Jerome, who lived at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries after Christ. He explained that at that time Greek zoologists had identified 153 different varieties of fish. So, if a catch of 153 fish would signify every type of fish known then to man, then such a catch by the apostles could easily signify that as fishers of men they would bring in every known nation of men on the earth to the faith. For Jesus had once told them, “The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind.”<sup>1</sup>

Others have seen yet another significance in the number 153. It is the sum total of all the numbers from one through 17 and the number 17 itself, in turn, is the sum of the numbers seven and ten, which in the ancient Hebrew mentality were the numbers of completeness and perfection. Therefore, the catch of fish, which the apostles made on the Sea of Galilee represents the full “catholic,” that is universal character, that the Church would have. And so, it is in seemingly insignificant details such as these that we see how St. John constructed his gospel accounts so as to use historical events and seemingly insignificant details to convey a profound message about the faith.

Jesus had once told the apostles, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”<sup>2</sup> When they had made this symbolic catch of fish, it was the head fisherman, Peter, who dove into the water to head to the shore ahead of the others, who rowed the boat back in. When Jesus asked them to bring some of the fish, which they had just caught, it was Peter, who “went over and dragged the net ashore.”<sup>3</sup>

And after they had eaten breakfast, it was to Peter that Jesus turned and said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”<sup>4</sup> And Peter answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”<sup>5</sup> Three times Jesus asked Peter the same question and by the third time Peter, distressed perhaps because he thought that maybe Jesus didn’t believe the sincerity of his answers. But Jesus was just undoing Peter’s threefold denial of Him. And not only was the threefold statement of love meant to nullify Peter’s threefold denial but the profession of love was made in front of a fire on the seashore, just as the denials were made in front of a fire in the high priest’s courtyard. In defining the revealed doctrine that Jesus gave Peter supreme authority over His Church after the resurrection, the First Vatican Council cited precisely these verses.

When Jesus told Simon, “Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church,”<sup>6</sup> He was promising Peter the papal primacy as head of His chosen band of apostles. When Jesus told Him, “Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs” on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, He actually conferred the primacy on Peter, who from that time became a

fisher of men from all nations and all peoples, who has lived on through all ages in the person of his successors, down to our very time in Benedict XVI. We are indeed fortunate that we have a Savior so wise and good that he has given us an unwavering source of unity in Peter and an unfailing teacher of the truth that He has kept free from error. We are indeed fortunate to have such a good and faithful Peter for our times in Pope Benedict to help lead us through these very turbulent times in which we live. We need Benedict very much at the helm of our Church. And he needs us very much to pray for him.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:47.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:17.

<sup>3</sup> John 21:11.

<sup>4</sup> John 21:15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:18.