Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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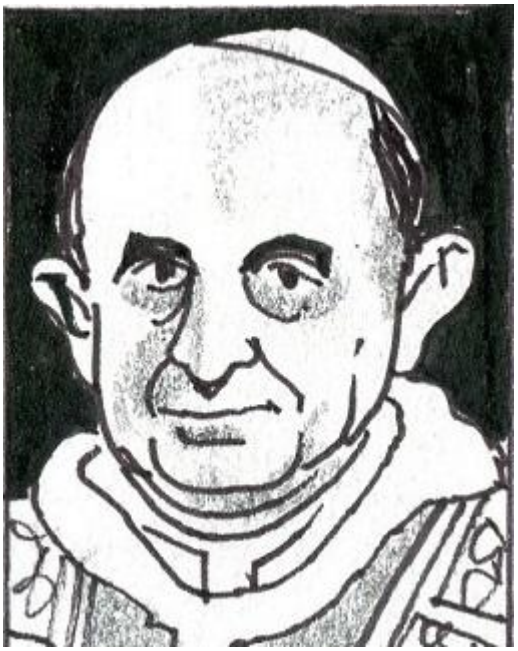

Peter was distressed that he said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" (John 21:17).

Acts 25:13b-21; John 21:15-19

We commemorate the newly minted Saint Pope Paul VI today, and today's Gospel reminds us of the difficult challenges he faced as pope. He followed the beloved Pope John XIII, who died after launching the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and Pope Paul, as caretaker of the council was often cast as an indecisive figure who slowed the spirit of reform and disappointed many with his interventions and his controversial encyclical on birth control.

What in hindsight perhaps better describes Pope Paul was his struggle under the enormous weight of a church in radical transition and his fidelity to the unity of the church as the primary role of the pope. Like the first pope, Peter, in today's moving Gospel, Pope Paul's love for the church meant acknowledging his own limitations and shouldering the needs of a global community of enormous diversity entrusted to his care.

"Feed my lambs, feed my sheep," Jesus said to Peter over and over, and Paul VI knew this meant all of them. Holding together a church pulling in many directions all at once, Paul sought to shepherd both the traditionalists and the progressives, the first world reformers and third world bishops seeking basic development. He tried to balance change and stability, advance and retreat as ideological battles threatened

both the council and the church. In the end, he satisfied no one and embittered both liberals and conservatives, some of whom left the church.

Jesus tells Peter that the youthful freedom he had known on his fishing boats would end as age and the toils of ministry led him against his will into captivity and suffering. Pope Paul, servant leader of the church during some of its most turbulent years was brought down by the burdens of office and personal losses he endured during a time violent political turmoil in Italy.

In the end, only love mattered. For all of us, despite our disappointments and limitations, following the lights we are given us and remaining faithful to the values and beliefs that formed us are how we complete our vocations. Peter's weaknesses became his greatest strength as he witnessed to God's mercy for failures and hopeless sinners. Pope Paul's personal preferences and agendas were secondary to his responsibility to move the church forward with compromise and controversial decisions. It was his job to guide the ship between the rocks and whirlpool of opposing visions.

Every servant leader faces this kind of challenge, as surely Pope Francis knows in today's church. There must be days when he wishes the burdens would be lifted so could retire to the favelas of Buenos Aires, or when God will grant him an even more permanent rest. Whichever occurs first, he will finish his course because, for those called by Jesus, love is all that matters.

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