

St. Peter the Apostle



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Statue of St. Peter the Fisherman outside St. Peter's Parish in Waldorf, Maryland

FIRST CENTURY
PRINCE OF THE APOSTLES AND FIRST POPE
FEAST DAYS: JUNE 29 (WITH ST. PAUL)
AND FEBRUARY 22 (CHAIR OF PETER)

GOD does not always choose those who are the holiest, strongest, and most learned, but those whose very weaknesses show God's power: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Cor 12:9). St.

Peter the Apostle was one of those chosen, perhaps because of his very weaknesses.

Simon Peter was from Bethsaida in Galilee, a village a little north of the Sea of Galilee. His father's name was John or Jonah. He became a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, in partnership with his brother Andrew, and they settled in Capernaum, a fishing village on the northern shore. He had been married but may have been widowed by the time he met Jesus (Jesus healed

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his mother-in-law but his wife is never mentioned in Sacred Scripture).

Peter was one of Jesus' first followers. One day, as Peter and Andrew were repairing their nets, Jesus came and said to them, *“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”* (Mt 4:19). They immediately left their nets. Peter was impetuous, and sometimes spoke before thinking, but it is easy to see why Jesus sought out this man, who threw himself wholeheartedly into everything and was a natural leader.



Throughout the New Testament, Peter is shown as the head of the apostles. He is named first in every list of the apostles, and he usually was their spokesman. On one momentous occasion, when Jesus asked them who they thought he was, it was Peter, inspired by God the Father, who said, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Mt 16:16). It was then that Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter (“Rock”), making him the foundation-stone of his Church and giving him authority as its head. When God changes someone's name, it always signified a special mission for that person, and so it was for Peter.

Yet Peter had many faults and failures. At one point, he felt he was so unworthy of Jesus that he begged Jesus to *“[d]epart from me, for I am a sinful man”* (Lk 5:8). When Jesus came to the apostles in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, walking on the water, Peter climbed out of the boat toward Jesus — and began to sink from lack of faith. Jesus had to rebuke Peter once, saying, *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men”* (Mk 8:33) when Peter refused to accept that Jesus would have to suffer and die. Peter objected to Jesus washing his feet at the Last Supper — an act Jesus intended to teach the future leaders of his Church that theirs was a ministry of service. When Jesus rebuked him for his false humility and told Peter that he would have no part in him if Jesus did not wash his feet, Peter with a characteristic all-or-nothing response asked Jesus to wash his

hands and his head as well — that is, he would be more completely Jesus' than would anyone else. Peter's most shameful act was his cowardly denial a mere few hours later, not once but three times, that he even knew Jesus, following Jesus' arrest. Yet Peter did not despair but repented of his great sin. It is he whom Jesus, following his Resurrection, told to tend and feed his sheep — care for and teach the members of his Church — confirming Peter in his office as chief shepherd of the

Catholic Church.

At Pentecost, Peter, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, preached to the pilgrim crowds in Jerusalem. In his impassioned eloquence he that day converted three thousand souls to faith in Jesus Christ. He presided over the Church as the first Pope, initially in Antioch, Syria and then in Rome. His martyrdom as Bishop of Rome under the Roman emperor Nero about 67 A.D., together with that of St. Paul, made Rome the center of the Church. Tradition says that Peter was crucified upside down because he did not believe himself worthy to die in the same way his Lord had died. His body was buried in a cemetery on the Vatican hill just west of the Tiber River. In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine had a basilica built directly over his grave. Today, millions of pilgrims come to St. Peter's Basilica, which replaced Constantine's basilica in the sixteenth century, to see the beauty of its structure and art and to pray at the tomb of this great saint, the Prince of the Apostles.

The Feast of the Chair of Peter is celebrated on February 22. The Chair of Peter means the authority given to Peter by Christ to exercise the office of supreme ruler and teacher for the whole Church. Christ made a precious gift to his Church in the person of Peter, and in the person of every successor of Peter down to the present day, for the Office of Peter is the visible binding force of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.