

## A Thematic Presentation of the First Letter of St. Peter (1-5)

### Third lesson from the Catholic Letters

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**Introduction:** 1 Peter is a letter from St. Peter to the believers who had been dispersed throughout the ancient world and were under intense persecution. It was written between AD 60 and 65 AD. If anyone understood persecution, it was Peter. He was beaten, threatened, punished, and jailed for preaching the Word of God. He knew what it took to endure without bitterness, without losing hope and in great faith living an obedient, victorious life. Though this time of persecution was desperate, Peter reveals that it was actually a time to rejoice. He says to count it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ, as their Savior suffered for them.

**Persecution: 1:1-8** The apostle Peter wrote this letter to encourage Christian believers who would like face trials and persecution under Emperor Nero. They faced persecution in different forms. Firstly Romans thought of Christians as members of a Jewish sect. Because the Jewish religion was legal, they considered Christianity legal also - as long as Christians complied with the empire's laws. However, if Christians refused to worship the emperor or join the army or worship at pagan temples, they were punished by the civil authorities. Many Jewish people did not appreciate being legally associated with Christians in Rome. They hated them as we frequently read the Jewish hatred towards Christians. Secondly, under the Roman law, the head of the household had absolute authority over all its members. If the male head was not a christian, the children, wife and the slaves who were christians faced extreme hardship. If they were sent away, they would have no place to go but the church.

Seeing all these hard realities, Peter encourages them to face persecution, presenting Jesus' resurrection from the dead, a very glorious life for anyone who believed in Christ. Peter knew persecution firsthand. Beaten and jailed, he had been threatened often. He had seen fellow christians die and the church scattered. But he knew christ and nothing could shake his confidence in the Risen Lord. Peter writes to the church scattered and suffering for the faith, giving comfort, and hope and urging continued loyalty to Christ. He outlines the right attitude to have about persecution: Expect it (4:12), be thankful for the privilege of suffering for Christ (4:13-18) and trust for deliverance (4:19).

Many christians around the world are living under governments more repressive than the Roman Empire of the first century. Christians everywhere are subject to misunderstanding, ridicule and even harassment by unbelieving friends, employers and family members. During such moments, we need to lean on God's grace. Persecution makes us stronger because it refines our faith. Like gold is heated (1:7) or steel is tempered by heating it on fire, our trials, struggles and persecution define our

faith, making us useful to God. When we rely on him, we could face persecution victoriously. Persecution did not stop the spread of the gospel; instead, persecution served as a way to introduce the Good News to the whole world.

**Be holy because I am holy (1:16):** After asking people to commit their lives to Christ, Peter makes them reflect the holiness of God. Holiness means being totally devoted or dedicated to God, setting apart for his special use by being away from sins and their influences. What makes us different from others? We are called to possess God's qualities in our lives and our focus and priorities must be his and for that we need to be in direct contrast to our old ways. We cannot become holy on our own, but God gives us the Holy Spirit to overcome our sins.

God wants us to be holy (set apart, different and unique) dedicated to worship him alone and be separate from wickedness and lead a moral life as he is holy. Since we rub shoulders with unbelievers everyday and live in an unholy world, it is not easy but with his grace we shall be able to lead a holy life.

**The power of the word of God (1:24-25):** quoting Isaiah 40:6-8, Peter reminds believers that everything in this life - possessions, accomplishments and people - will eventually fade away and disappear. Only God's will, word and work are permanent. We must stop grasping the temporary and begin focusing our time, money, energy on the permanent - the word of God and our eternal life in Christ.

**The Living Stone and a Chosen People (2: 4-10)** The Church is described as God's spiritual house. Peter calls Jesus, the Living Stone and the chosen people as living stones. The church is the living and spiritual house, with Christ as the foundation and cornerstone and each believer as a stone while Paul portrays the Church as a body, with Christ as the head and each believer as a member (Eph 4:15-16)

**A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall (2:8).**  
**How?** People who refuse to believe in Christ make greatest mistake in their life. They stumble over the one person who could save them and give meaning to their lives.

**You are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises" of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (2:9).**

This verse highlights the characteristics of the children of God. Peter uses language that had been used to describe God's special relationship with Israel in the OT. As Israel was a chosen race, we the believers have been chosen by God, a chosen race in the spiritual sense (unlike race of ethnicity, skin color, or country of origin). We are a spiritual race, in the sense that, in Christ, we share a single spiritual Father. In that same meaning, we

are a "holy nation," a specific group of people called out and set apart from all other nations.

Christians, together, are a royal priesthood. In Israel, under the Law, one tribe (Levites) was given the task of serving as priests, performing the duties of mediators between God and the rest of the nation. But in and through Christ, the King, we all share Jesus' eternal priesthood through the sacrament of our baptism. We are His people in a very real way. We belong to Him. Therefore we declare His praises and that is one reason for our very existence. When we praise Him, we fulfill our purpose. He has called us out of the darkness into His wonderful, marvelous light. Because we belong to Him, we belong in His light. As we journey through our life, we are to proclaim to the world, in thought, word, action, attitude, and motive, the excellent glories of our heavenly Father Who redeemed us from the darkness of sin and death - into the glories of His life and light, in Christ.

**Christian Submission to civil authorities (2:13-17):** When Paul told his readers to submit to civil authorities, he was speaking of the Roman Empire under Nero, a notoriously a cruel tyrant. We read in Acts 5:29 where Peter says, "we must obey God rather than men". However, in practical life, we must live accordingly to the law of the land. Some christians live in freedom while other live under repressive governments. We are commanded to cooperate with the rulers as far as conscience allows us. However if we are to be persecuted, it should be for obeying God and not for breaking moral or civil laws.

St. Paul in Romans 13:1-7 teaches when to obey and when not to obey the civil authorities. We should never allow government to force us to disobey God. Jesus and his disciples never disobeyed the government for personal reasons. When they disobeyed, it was in order to follow their higher loyalty to God. Their disobedience cost them heavily: they were threatened, beaten, thrown into jail, tortured and executed for their convictions.

**Christians and Religious Liberty:** we agree that we are to live at peace with the state as long as the state allows us to live by our religious convictions. Some Christians believe that their state is so corrupt that they should have as little as possible to do with it. They do not want to work for the government and vote in elections or serve in the military. Some others believe that God has given the state authority in certain areas and the church authority in others. They can be loyal to both and can work for either. There is no confusion between the two. Church and state are totally two different spheres - the spiritual and the physical - they complement each other but do not work together. Some spiritually matured christians believe that they have a responsibility to make the state better. They can do this only politically by electing christian or other high principled leaders. They can also do this morally by serving as an influence for good in society. In

this view, the church and the state can work together ideally for the good of all. The above three views do not violate the government laws and regulations. Wherever we find ourselves, we must be responsible citizens as well as responsible christians. When civil rulers are unjust, upright people are afraid. When civil rulers are just, we have nothing to fear.

**What is our religious commitment to the civil authorities?** Prayer. 1 Timothy 2: 1-3 First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. This is good and pleasing to God our savior" (Titus 3:1/ Hebrews 13:17)

**Righteous suffering (2:19-24):** We may suffer for many reasons. Some suffering is the direct result of our own sin. Some suffer because of their own stupidities and wrong choices. Some suffer because of the fallen world in which we live. But some suffer because of being and doing good which Peter is talking in these verses. Christ never sinned, yet he suffered so much in order to set us free. When we follow Christ's examples and live for others, we too may suffer.

**How to deal with suffering?** As Jesus did with patience, calmness and confidence that God is in control of our future. Peter had learnt about suffering from Jesus. He knew that suffering was part of God's plan (Matthew 16:21-23) and was intended to save us. All who follow Jesus must be ready to suffer.

**The power of a christian woman's witness (3:1-7):** In the Biblical world, when a man became a christian, he would usually bring his whole family into the church with him (Philippian jailer in Acts 16:29-33). By contrast, when a woman became a christian, she did not have the liberty in the male dominated jewish society. Under the Roman law, the husband and father had absolute authority over all members of his household, including his wife. Demanding her rights as a free woman in Christ could endanger her marriage if her husband disapproved. St. Peter reassured christian women who were married to unbelievers that they didn't need to preach to their husbands. Under the circumstances, their best approach would be one of loving service. They should show their husbands the kind of self giving love that Christ showed the church. By being exemplary wives, they would please their husbands who might join them and become Christians later on. A changed life speaks loudly and clearly and it is often the most effective way to influence a family members. St. Peter instructs Christian wives to develop inner beauty rather than being overly concerned about their outward appearance.

**Husbands, show honor to the “weaker” female sex (3:7):** you husbands should live with your wives in understanding, showing honor *to the weaker female sex*, since we are joint heirs of the gift of life, so that *your prayers may not be hindered*.

**In what sense, Peter calls them weaker sex?** He does not imply moral or intellectual inferiority but he is recognizing their physical limitations most probably because women in those days were vulnerable to attack, abuse and financial disaster. Although women’s lives are easier today (not everywhere), women are still vulnerable to attack and abuse. In spite of increased opportunities in the work place, most women still earn considerably less than most men. Single mothers and their children are still poor in many countries. Therefore a man who honors his wife as a member of the weaker sex will protect, respect, help and stay with her offering courtesy, sensitivities and considerations.

**Husbands and their prayer life:** If a husband is not considerate and respectful of his wife, his prayers will be hindered because a living relationship with God depends on right relationships with others especially the family member. First we have to set our house in order before we speak about disorder of the other people. Jesus said that if you have a problem with a fellow believer, you must make it right with that person before coming to worship (Matthew 5:23, 24). This principle carries over into family relationships. If men use their positions to mistreat their wives, their relationships with God will suffer.

**Hallmarks of Christian life (3:8-18):** St. Peter lists five key elements that should characterize any group of believers: Harmony, Sympathy, Love, Compassion and Humility. St. Peter developed the qualities of compassion and humility the hard way. In his early days with Christ, these characteristics did not come naturally to his impulsive and strong willed personality. But the Holy Spirit changed Peter, molding his strong personality to God’s use and teaching his tenderness and humility. In our fallen world, tearing down people verbally or getting back at others when we feel hurt seems acceptable but Peter, remembering Jesus’ teaching to turn the other cheek encourages us to pay back wrongs by praying for the offenders. Revenge is unacceptable behavior in God’s reign.

**Jesus also went to preach to the spirits in prison (3:19):** The meaning of preaching to the spirits in prison is not very clear and commentators have different explanations. The traditional interpretation is that Christ, between his death and resurrection, announced salvation to God’s faithful followers who had been waiting for their salvation during the whole OT era. Matthew in 27:52-53 records that when Jesus died, “the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs and after Jesus’ resurrection, they went to the holy city and appeared to many people”. Some interpret that Jesus went to Hades (place of departed spirits also known as hell) as

we profess in the Apostles' Creed (He descended into hell). He went to proclaim his victory and final condemnation to the fallen angels imprisoned there since Noah' day ( 2 Peter 2:4).

**Jesus judges the living and the dead (4:5-6):** Many people in the early church had concerns about life after death. In Thessalonica, Christians worried that loved ones who died before Christ' return might never see Christ (1 Thes 4:13-18). St. Peter reminds that the dead would be judged as they also heard the gospel. The Good News was announced first when Jesus preached on the earth but it has been operating since before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) and it affects all people, the dead as well as the living.

**Optimize your gifts for God's glory (4:10-11):** Some people, well aware of their abilities, believe that they have the right to use their abilities as they please. Others feel that they have no special talents at all. Peter addresses both groups in these verses. Everyone has some gifts and we need to find ours and use them for others. Peter speaks of speaking and serving. St. Paul does mention other qualities in Rom 12:6-8/ 1 Cor 12:8-11/ Eph 4:11). When people see light shining before others and see the good deeds in our life, then they praise the heavenly father.

**Need of good leaders in the church:** Peter was the chosen leader among the chosen disciples, participated in the glorious moments of Jesus' transfiguration, the spokesperson of the apostles, witnessed Jesus' death and resurrection, preached at Pentecost, pillar of the Jerusalem church. Writing to the elders, he identifies himself as a fellow elder, not a superior. He asked them to tend God's flock, exactly what Jesus told him to do (John 21:15-17). He took his own advice as he worked along with other elders in caring for God's flock

**Peter identifies several characteristics of good leaders in the church:** To take care of God's flock and not their own/eagerness to serve and not out of obligation/to give than to receive / leading by example and not force. We also serve people at home, in church and at work place. Whatever our role, our leadership should be in line with these characteristics.

**Jesus the chief shepherd: Who is a shepherd?** A shepherd is the one who leads, feeds, nurtures, comforts, corrects, and protects his flock. St. Peter on the day of Pentecost reminds his Jewish listeners that they have crucified Jesus their true Shepherd. Jesus introduces himself in John 10 as the good shepherd of his flock and he makes three claims about his shepherding ministry.

**I know my sheep and my sheep hear my voice.** The Palestinian shepherds knew each sheep of their flock by name and they used to call them by name (as we call our pet

dogs by name). Since the sheep were familiar with the voice of their shepherd, they listened to their shepherd. Jesus, as our good shepherd, knows each of us by name. He knows our merits and demerits, strengths and weaknesses but still he loves us. As his flock, we have to listen to him when he speaks to us. It is very important for us the clergy to know our flock and identify them at least by seeing their face if not by their name. They are expected to be visible in the parishes. The pastors should have the smell of the sheep. They should be friendly and approachable to the parishioners.

**I give them eternal life. How?** He gives us eternal life by adopting us as his children through the sacrament of Baptism, by strengthening our faith through the sacrament of Confirmation, by nourishing our soul through the sacrament of Holy Eucharist and by making us a holy life by the sacraments of matrimony and the priesthood. Jesus says in John 10:10 'I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly'. The priests are called to infuse life in the minds and hearts of their parishioners by their life of preaching, teaching, serving, exhorting, encouraging, confronting and being compassionate in every way manifesting the face of Jesus.

**No one can take them out of the hands of My Father.** Jesus protects us from all sorts of dangers. As priests of Jesus, they are called to protect the entrusted souls. When they are down with physical illness, they heal them through the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. When they are down with spiritual sickness, they heal the wounds of their soul through the sacrament of Reconciliation. Just as the Palestinian shepherds protected their sheep from wild animals and thieves by risking their own lives, Jesus the good shepherd died in expiation for the sins of all people. Like Jesus the supreme shepherd, every priest is called to be a frontline warrior during difficult moments.

**All of us are shepherds:** Like priests are called to be good shepherds in their parish communities, lay people are called to be good shepherds at home, at work place and in the parish community. As parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials, policemen, firefighters and any other responsibility one may hold, we are expected to be good shepherds to those who are entrusted to our care. we become good shepherds by loving the ones who are entrusted to us, by praying for them, by spending our time and talents for their welfare, and by guarding them from physical and spiritual dangers.

**How to be good sheep in the parish community?** The pastors are shepherds, helpers and spiritual leaders. As a good sheep of the community, the laity are expected to hear and follow the voice of their shepherds in their homilies, Bible classes, counseling and advice. Participation in the holy mass and receiving the Holy Communion, Frequenting the sacraments, devotion to prayer services and different ministries, renewal programs and missions are very important. The laity are expected to cooperate with the pastors by giving them positive suggestions for the welfare of the parish, by encouraging them in their duties, by lovingly offering them constructive criticism when they fail in their

duties and above all by praying for them daily. They are also expected to cooperate with your own fellow parishioners in the activities of various councils, ministries and parish associations.

**Conclusion to the book of 1st Letter of St. Peter (1-5):** St. Peter wrote this letter just before the cruel emperor Nero began persecuting Christians in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire. Afraid for his life, he had denied Jesus three times. But here, having learned how to stand firm in an evil world, he encouraged other Christians who were facing persecution for their faith. Peter himself lived by the words that he wrote because he was martyred for his faith. Those who stand for Christ will be persecuted because the world is ruled by Christ's greatest enemy. But just as the small group of early believers stood against persecution, so we must be willing to stand for our truth with patience, endurance and courage that Peter exhibited.

Unjust or unforeseen suffering is one of the great problems that grips the hearts of people today. We struggle with frustration, anger, and uncertainty when trials strange and unexpected land on our doorsteps. Too often in those most difficult moments of our lives, confusion reigns while contentment wanes; questions arise while prayer subsides. How do we react when suffering comes? Many crumble at the mere thought of another pain or trial. Others rise to the occasion. Most of us are probably somewhere in between. Peter's encouragement to his Christian readers is one of perseverance in faith. It isn't enough for us to simply get up every morning and while away during the day; neither is it advisable to paste a smile on our faces and ignore troubles. Instead, the lesson of 1 Peter is to push through the troubles, recognizing their temporary presence in our lives while walking in holiness and hope as people of faith.

