

□ Reading time: 4 min.

*The encounter between Jesus and Peter sheds a special light on our mission as evangelizers and educators.*

In the final chapter of the Gospel of John, chapter 21, we find the encounter between Jesus and Peter. We read a dialogue built around three questions, ending with a commission (John 21:15-23). I would like to comment on this encounter, which casts a particular light on our very mission as evangelizers and educators. This passage marks a pivotal moment in Peter's life and also in the mission of the early Church. For those of us engaged in the Salesian mission, it is rich with educative and pastoral significance.

After the resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias and, after sharing a meal with them, addresses Simon Peter with three successive questions that touch on the direct relationship between him and Peter: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" In the first two questions, Jesus asks for a demanding love that counts no cost. This question, asked twice, is challenging and demanding for Peter. He is aware of his weakness caused by his betrayal. For this reason, both times his answer testifies to love, but a more human, fragile love. Despite these two answers, Jesus entrusts him with the care of his flock.

It is the third question that unsettles Peter because Jesus, at this point, asks Peter precisely for the commitment in that love he is capable of: human love with its weaknesses, fragility, and limits. We can say that Jesus calls Peter to a "higher" love but does not want to put him in an impossible or discouraging situation.

Peter, for his part, realizes both that his love is weak and that Jesus does everything possible to help him not give up. He wants to be sincere and stay close to Jesus. His answer to the third question is a testimony of how his heart, even if wounded, wants to be fully placed in Jesus' hands: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (v.17).

We discover then that this is not merely a threefold dialogue recalling and surpassing Peter's threefold denial before the Passion. Here we have an example of a dialogue marking a path founded on true love, which fosters reconciliation, encourages growth and responsibility towards oneself and others. We glimpse how this dialogue between Jesus and Peter is a model of spiritual and human education. Here are some observations useful for those of us who accompany boys and young people in the growth and maturation of their lives.

### **True love is based on trust that never fails**

After the betrayal, Jesus not only forgives Peter but goes further: he entrusts him with an even greater responsibility. This represents an extraordinary educational lesson for us: trust given is a renewed confirmation of respect for the person. It is a love that grants dignity and responsibility. Jesus does not merely forgive but restores Peter's mission, enriched by new awareness.

### **Respect for individual times and journeys**

Following Peter's betrayal, foretold by Jesus, there is not the usual, "I told you so" reaction. Jesus "sees" the betrayal but also "sees" beyond it. Jesus' love knows human weakness but has the strength to awaken from within the wounded heart, the seed of goodness. And this seed never disappears. What Don Bosco called the point of goodness in every boy's heart is here seen as something Jesus finds and does everything possible to bring out. The wrong done must never have the last word. The last word must be love, the charity of the good shepherd.

This means having the right patience and respect for timing. Experience teaches us that often the wrong done only needs to be met with affection, patience, and compassion. Especially boys and young people—and Don Bosco comments well on this when speaking of the Preventive System. When boys and young people feel surrounded by mature, adult love that facilitates rather than condemns, that listens rather than orders, that hidden but present goodness towards good springs forth. It is a spring that triggers surprises of goodness often forgotten or overwhelmed by negative experiences lived or suffered.

How urgent it is today that our boys and young people find adults, parents, educators who are healthy and mature, patient and farsighted! Authentic paths respect the uniqueness of the person, with their weaknesses but also their potential. We are true benefactors when we see time as a space for gradual and consistent growth. This attitude avoids proposing, or worse imposing, standardized models that put people into boxes.

### **Comparison and the temptation to compare**

Towards the end of the encounter between Jesus and Peter, there is a detail I want to comment on. Peter asks Jesus about John: "And what about him?" Jesus cuts him off, as we say today: "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?" A very blunt answer, and it is also a good lesson for Peter. In a few words, Jesus invites Peter to focus on his own growth without asking curious and useless

questions about others. Such a “blunt” answer is fitting! Being responsible and helping others toward responsibility also means clarifying the parameters so the growth process does not get lost. Because the risk of comparison and measuring oneself against others is harmful. The true educational path is personal, not competitive. Diverting attention from oneself to others distracts from focusing on one’s own journey.

**Conclusion: education as a loving relationship that generates the future**

The passage culminates in the invitation “Follow me.” In these two words lies the essence of the Christian educational process: personal following, direct relationship with the Master. Authentic education is not the transmission of knowledge but an introduction to a living relationship.

The threefold “Do you love me?” reveals that love is the foundation of every authentic educative relationship. Only when the educator truly loves the learner, and the learner responds with love, is created that space of freedom and trust in which the person can fully grow. Christian education, the Salesian experience, finds in this passage a sublime model: a process of transformation based on love, forgiveness, trust, and respect for freedom.