Peter: The Patron Saint of the Church

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

I wish that, whenever I learned something, it would stay that way forever! In elementary school, I learned countries and their capitals and their pronunciations; but now I read the newspapers and there is still another way to spell Beijing. I memorized the names of all the players on that first Atlanta Braves team (I was ten years old), but then all the players changed. That information today gets me only one correct answer on a quiz show. In this U.S. economy, I have learned the best telephone deal, the most economical computer deal, the best monthly rates; but that information was surpassed within a year.

Yes, the facts we learned yesterday must always be translated into tomorrow's situation. And it is the same way for our faith. I know that God never changes; but the way we understand our faith does indeed change. The way we believed yesterday changes if we are to face tomorrow with the same faith.

Examine our old friend, St. Peter. What an image of tradition and respect he commands! He was preeminent among Jesus's first disciples. He is the person who drops everything to follow Jesus. He is the person to whom Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Upon this rock, says Jesus, upon Peter, Jesus will build his church.

Great Peter! He has the correct answer to Jesus's tremendous question, "Who do you say that I am?" It is Peter who makes the great confession: "You are the Messiah."

Peter got it right! But within minutes, Peter does not have it right at all. Peter has it wrong. When Jesus begins to explain more particularly what "messiah" really means (that it will entail suffering and rejection and death), Peter says, "Oh no, that is not what 'messiah,' or 'the Christ' means; that will never happen to you." In fact, the scriptures say that Peter rebuked Jesus. Then, Jesus's attitude towards Peter changes just as sharply. Jesus says to Peter, his friend really, the preeminent one among the disciples, Jesus says to St. Peter, "Get behind me, Satan."

Now, that is a strong word to describe someone upon whom you will build a church! But the point is that Peter still had to learn, over time, just what the particulars of that confession meant. His conception of "messiah" would have to change. He had learned the definition of "messiah" one way, but Jesus had a new way for Peter to understand "messiah." For Jesus, "messiah" would mean someone who denied himself for the world, who would give his life for the salvation of humanity.

St. Peter is the patron saint of the church because he gets it right, and he gets it wrong, so often. Peter is the sign for us that, as faithful as we might be, we are never at a point where we know completely. In matters of faith, just as in matters of science, what we know at one point in our journey will always have to be re-interpreted for the next point in our journey.

St. Peter is the patron saint of the church because the church, too, makes mistakes over time. What we practiced in one generation may not be correct in the next. Like Peter, the Christian church is a grand mixture of both the good and the bad, the right and wrong. Peter can call Jesus the messiah in one moment, and be criticized as "Satan" in the next breath.

If Peter had so much to learn and re-learn, over and over again, imagine how much we have to learn, too. Imagine how many times we will have to be converted. For, conversion is not just a one-time event. It is not simply a matter of declaring the faith in one way, for all time, and then being self-satisfied for the rest of our lives. No, for those who follow Jesus daily, conversion, too, is a daily event. To be converted is to commit oneself to Jesus daily, to commit ourselves to different behavior when God reveals something different about himself to us.

To be converted, then, is to learn the "habit" of conversion. To be converted means learning how to be converted again and again.

Sam Candler