

Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on August 21, 2011
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Liturgical Year A

Today, Peter confesses who Jesus is. He is Messiah, God's Anointed; he is God's Son. But notice what happens next. Jesus doesn't go on at length to elaborate on what Peter has said. Instead, he tells Peter who Peter is. The moment of Peter's great profession of faith becomes the moment when Peter is acknowledged as head of the Church.

Confessing who Jesus is not an affair of the lips or the mind. When you or I or Peter profess faith in Jesus, Jesus responds by telling us who we are – and how we are to live. If we believe that Jesus is (as Peter says he is today) "the Christ, the Son of the living God", then it must change who we are and how we live. We're not just sensitive, caring, generous Americans. We are followers of Jesus Christ.

Some years ago, an American professor went to a conference in what was then the Soviet Union. He had a striking conversation with a Russian colleague. "You are a Christian," she said to him. "I'm an atheist. Tell me, what difference does your belief in God make when you vote? Tell me, does your faith in Jesus Christ make a difference in the way you spend your money?" The American said he was stunned by the question. "I realized," he said, "that though I confessed like a Christian, I behaved as if God made no difference." It was a stunning and life-changing moment.

Tell Jesus he is the Christ, and he will tell you who you are and who you are to be. He won't ask, "Do you agree?" He'll simply say, "Follow me".

Note what happens when Peter makes that astounding leap of faith. He gets a new name. "Peter" means "Rocky". He's the first Rocky. Way ahead of Marciano or Stallone. Names in the Bible are important. Names like Abraham, Moses, Israel. God gave those names and by naming people changed them. Peter gets a new name. Simon becomes Rocky – Peter. Peter gets a new mission, a new way of life.

It's still true of us. Our baptism rite begins with a naming. "What name do you give this child?" Part of the name you and I get is our identity before God. "You are Lucy. You are Fred. You are Joanne. You are Louis."

Through us, God continues to build the church. Peter was the first rock. You and I are "rock" number 5 billion or more.

It's important what Peter believes about Jesus. But it's just as important what Jesus believes about Peter. It's a challenge today: believing what Peter believes about Jesus...believing what Jesus believes about us.