



INTEGRITAS

Wyoming Catholic College

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“FIRE AND ROCK”

BY MOST REV. STEVEN R. BIEGLER

BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF CHEYENNE

(HOMILY FROM THE 2017 CONVOCATION MASS, AUGUST 27TH, 2017)

St. Peter is an interesting choice as the Rock of the Church. So often, his mouth gets him into trouble. At times, he is proud and impetuous, a very strong presence. Other times, he's afraid, he's humble, and he's repentant. When I look at Peter, I see a normal human being, and that gives me hope; if God can transform a Peter, He can transform any of us. If he can use Peter (with his weaknesses) as such a powerful witness, then He can do the same with each of us.



One of the gifts Peter has received is the gift of his faith—a faith he professes so clearly and confidently, saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In the Gospel of John, he's even more powerful: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life....you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” That faith—seemingly so solid—crumbles so quickly with his triple denial, yet he's the one Jesus chose to be the Rock of our Church.

What is it that made Peter into the Rock of our Faith, the Rock of the Church? It is important for us to reflect on that question, because the answer will guide us on our own journey. If we can understand what made Peter a rock, it will help us to have the same strong faith despite our sins and the quirkiness of our own personalities. First (and most obviously, perhaps), Peter was a rock because that is what Jesus called him to be. Jesus said to him, “Simon, son of Jonah, you are Peter”—*Petros* in the Greek—“and on this rock (*Petra*), I will build My Church.” Now, *petra* means more than just rock. It means bedrock. Because of this double meaning, the name “Peter” is saying more about him than simply that he is a “stone,” carrying with it the sense of the weight and solidness of bedrock. So the shift from Simon to Peter is a dramatic and defining change.

In this moment, God bestows a new name with a new identity and mission. But Peter will have to grow and mature in relation to that identity and mission. And it's that process of maturing that applies to our journey, as well. We, too, must undergo that process of maturation and growth in order to be true people of faith, and in order to be grounded in that faith in the way Peter was grounded in his. Imagine for a moment that Peter is made of soft rock and God needs to harden him. Those aren't technical geological terms, I know, but Peter is soft, like so many of us. Think for a moment of

the granite of the Wind River Range—a hard, igneous rock. “Igneous” come from a Latin word that means “fiery rock,” a rock that was formed from molten lava in the heat and fire of a volcano.

Likewise, the softness of Peter was transformed into igneous rock—granite-hard—through the fire that he experienced at the Passion. That transformation of Peter into solid granite is most clearly expressed in the Gospel of John: first, when Peter is standing at the charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest, Caiaphas, and later, at a charcoal fire at the Sea of Tiberius. At the house of the high priest, Peter denies Jesus three times; later, at the seashore, Jesus recalls that threefold denial by asking him three times, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

In all four gospels, there are only two references to a charcoal fire—a literary device to bring those two scenes (and their meanings) together. The fire of denial on the one hand; on the other, the fire of mercy. At that first charcoal fire, Peter melts with fear, but at the second, he becomes molten, infused now with the mercy of the Lord. The moment when Christ looks him in the eye and three times asks him, “Do you love Me?” is an electrifying moment for Peter. It’s as if he is clay in the volcano of God’s fierce love, and he’s being fired and hardened by that love.

That merciful encounter with the risen Christ made him a bold witness. Previously, he was cowering in the upper room, afraid to open the door; now he speaks with a humble boldness. Pope Francis has said, “We need to recapture the boldness of the first disciples”—a boldness that does not depend on my strength or on yours, but on the presence of the Risen Christ, who is stronger than sin and death, and is ever-merciful to us in our brokenness.

In the end, Peter is able to be the rock for us and for the Church because Christ is his rock. He makes this connection clear in his First Epistle, when he describes Jesus as the rock foundation of the Church. “Come to Him,” he says, “a living stone rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in God’s sight. And like living stones let yourself be built into a spiritual house.” So Peter speaks of Jesus as the Living Stone rather than of himself. And he understands that he can only be the Church’s Rock because he has put himself under the authority and at the mercy of the Rock of Christ.

In the Catholic tradition, Christ, the Living Stone, is symbolized by the altar. (As some of you may know, I blessed the new altar at the Church of the Ascension in Hudson just this morning, so I’ve pulled a bit of that altar imagery into this homily.) Now when we build altars, the Church asks the artisans to use natural stone (for the top of the altar,

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at least), and asks that it be fixed, as well—attached to the floor, if at all possible. This “rock-place” recalls the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, becoming an image not only of that sacrifice, but of Christ Himself. As a sign of this, we bow to the altar with a profound bow *even when* a tabernacle is not present.

Peter had to keep himself close to the sacrifice of Christ on the altar in order to stay strong and to do what he was called to do. Some of you probably know that the bones of St. Peter lie deep beneath the main altar of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Archeological investigations have ascertained the validity of the bones of Peter lying directly below the altar—a fitting resting place. In death, he has been placed for all time beneath Christ, the Living Stone.

Early Christians frequently placed the bones of martyrs under their altars, so if you go to Rome today, you will find bodies underneath many of its altars, the bodies of saints, even, whole and entire. It’s not because the bones of the martyrs make the altars holy, but because the mystery of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection that takes place on that altar makes martyrs, makes witnesses, makes people solid in their faith; it transforms us. This mystery molded Peter into a rock, and it will mold us, but we must faithfully come to and before this mystery—over and over again—in order for it to mold us.

That tradition is spoken of by Saint Ambrose, who says that “He who suffered for all is on the altar, and they who have been redeemed by His sufferings are beneath the altar.” In the book of Revelation, we find another reference: “I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God.” In the end, Peter is able to be our Rock because Christ is his Rock. Peter belongs under that Rock, and so do we.

The ritual for dedicating an altar describes it in two ways. First, it says that it is “a unique altar on which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated in mystery throughout the ages until Christ comes”; second, that it is “a table at which the Church’s children gather to give thanks to God and receive the Body and Blood of Christ.” So the image of an altar is that of a place of sacrifice, and then, of a table at which the Church’s children gather to give thanks and to receive the body and blood of Christ: a table and an altar.

Remember, the altar is to be fixed, solid as a rock, a place of Biblical sacrifice that brings us to the Cross. And as we enter into that mystery, it is only fitting that our tradition calls for a crucifix to be there, right at the altar (or in very close proximity to it). Yet the ritual states that the altar is not only supposed to be fixed; it is supposed to be free-standing, so that the priest can walk around it as he faces the people. Why is that, do you think? Perhaps it’s because it is called the Table of the Paschal Banquet, recalling not only the Last Supper, but the meals of the risen Lord with His disciples, where their hearts burn with His love and where they recognize Him in the breaking of the bread.

The Church emphasizes that image of the altar as a table because it's an image not only of the Last Supper but of the risen Christ—Christ, who presides at every Eucharist, standing at the head of His table and gathering us around him, to refresh and renew us with His body and His blood. Thus, the Paschal Banquet goes beyond the sacrifice of the Cross, and it prefigures the wedding feast of the Lamb in Heaven, the marriage feast, which was Our Lord's favorite image of the kingdom of God. The Church's reform of the liturgy at Vatican II recaptured both of these images of the altar as a place of sacrifice and as the table of the Paschal Banquet.

As we approach this altar today, I invite you to come as Peter came to that charcoal fire on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Come to it aware of your own sinfulness, aware of your own denial, aware of your failure to love as the Lord has commanded us to love. But more than that, be keenly aware of the look of Christ that transformed Peter, of that fiery look of mercy that is stronger than Peter's denial and stronger than anything that we have done.

When I was in Rome serving as a seminary faculty member, one of the things that I noticed was that young people moving from the familiar—whether it be their family and friends, their community, or even their church—often found themselves doing things that surprised them; they had periods of wandering. Like Peter, you may find yourself denying Him as you begin this new year. Many of you are leaving your home behind for the first time, leaving that rock-solid place where your faith was rooted. You may wander, but remember to return to this place of strength. Come back to this altar faithfully and with confidence, for Our Lord is a powerful, forgiving, and loving presence.

So as we come to the altar today, I encourage you to ask the Lord to make your heart burn with His mercy and with His powerful risen presence. Ask Him to help you to recognize Him in the breaking of the bread; ask Him to unite us. The altar is a place of unity, where sinners are redeemed by the blood of the Lord. So pray for the gift of unity; pray for that gift as you start a new school year. Ask Him to make you faithful as you come to this place of mercy. I will pray in a special way at this Mass, that these gifts of unity and faithfulness may be granted to Wyoming Catholic College this day.

Most Reverend Steven R. Biegler was born in Mobridge, South Dakota, and graduated from Timber Lake High School in 1977. He attended the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City for one year, 1977-78. Most of the next eight years, he worked on the family farm, with a break in Wyoming where he worked with a construction crew filling in old underground coal mines around Glenrock (near Casper). From there, he headed to the seminary, eventually receiving an STL (License in Biblical Theology) from the University of St. Thomas in Rome. In 2010-11, he served as Diocesan Administrator following the departure of then-Bishop Blaise Cupich for his appointment as Bishop of Spokane. He was ordained and installed as the ninth bishop of Cheyenne on June 5, 2017.

“OUT OF ECLIPSE”

BY DR. GLENN, C. ARBERY, PRESIDENT

(DELIVERED TO THE WYOMING CATHOLIC COLLEGE COMMUNITY
AT MATRICULATION, AUGUST 27TH, 2017)



Bishop Biegler, members of the Board of Directors, parents, faculty, staff, returning students, guests of the college, and especially our new freshmen, the class of 2021, welcome to this ceremony of matriculation. At the beginning of this month, when I first greeted you freshmen, I said that for your whole lives you would look back on the experience you have just undergone with a pride of recollection. Now down from the mountains, you have within you an analogy that will inform your lives and that already joins you to the classes that have come before.

But I had forgotten, when I spoke to you earlier, that you would be in the Wind River Mountains or the Tetons for the total eclipse of the sun this past week. In other words, not only did you have the expedition itself—this rite of passage that uniquely characterizes our college—but you were witness to an event that drew half a million people into Wyoming alone to see it, even though the “totality” lasted only two and a half minutes at the most. Many people spoke this past week about the remarkable unity the eclipse brought to a divided nation, crossing as it did from coast to coast. Even though the phenomena surrounding an eclipse are scientifically predictable in every way, seeing it nevertheless felt like a sign. Something in us—and not something merely shallow or superstitious—responds to the majesty of such an event, and it strikes me as distinctive to *this incoming class* that you were in the mountains to see it.

To experience majesty is to feel a natural awe—the wonder that is at the heart of all learning. Forgive me, then, if I dwell on the eclipse for a moment. When we think of an eclipse metaphorically, we think of the gradual darkening of what once shone brightly. For something to *be in eclipse* means that its former splendor has been hidden—a reputation in eclipse, for example. In the *Odyssey*, the goddess Kalypso, whose name (like eclipse) comes from the verb *kalyptein* “to cover, conceal,” hides Odysseus on her island for seven years, during which time the great hero of the Trojan War remains in eclipse, almost forgotten. A culture or civilization can be in eclipse, even its brightest and most central reality. The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber has a book called *Eclipse of God*, which refers to the Jewish concept of *hester panim*, the act of God concealing his face as a way of punishing his disobedient subjects, but this disturbing concealment is also a sign of hope, since the God who is hidden may also be sought and found.

On Monday morning, my daughter Monica and I drove to St. Stephen’s Mission to see the eclipse. My wife missed it because she was in Pennsylvania helping our daughter Therese with her new baby. Dr. Virginia texted to ask me if it was worth all the fuss, and I instantly wrote back, “It was holy.” Of course, I had to think later what I meant by

that. All through the gradual darkening of the sun, we were looking up through those glasses (thanks to Dr. Tom Zimmer for those, by the way) that obscure everything else but the sun. As soon as the “totality” begins, the glasses come off, and you’re looking up at a perfect circle in the heavens, the perfect alignment of sun and moon. The sun does not blind you because the moon comes between. You see the corona, you can reason yourself into this or that, but I don’t know how to describe the awe of it except with a sense of sacrament—holiness breaking through, a sense of the host, the Eucharist in the heavens: the sign.

In the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII of Plato’s *Republic*, the sun is the image of the Good for the prisoner coming up from the cave of shadows into the true light of the intellect. Outside the cave, the initiate looks first at shadows and reflections in water, then at the things themselves, and then up at the source of both their being and their illumination, the sun itself. In giving this allegory, Socrates does not mention the obvious impossibility embedded in this last step: looking at the sun itself, which—as we were endlessly reminded this week—leads to permanent blindness. Plato leaves implicit the philosophical impossibility of looking directly at the source of all being and truth. The eclipse let us look at the sun itself bearably, without being blinded, as the Incarnation allows us to look on God without being destroyed.

For all of us who witnessed the total eclipse, I daresay, there was a feeling of witness, of privilege, not because of the darkening or the totality itself, but because of that moment when the minute or two minutes of total eclipse ends in a sudden pinpoint of overwhelming light. Dr. Grove says it’s called the “diamond ring effect” and you see why. But *resurrection* feels more like the metaphor. I realize that my experience of the holiness of the moment was affected by hearing Fr. Robert Spitzer talk at the Napa Institute about “the kind of light impulse that would be needed to produce an image like that on the Shroud of Turin.”

[The ultraviolet light necessary to form the image] exceeds the maximum power released by all ultraviolet light sources available today says [the principal scholar of the image]. It would require “pulses having durations shorter than one forty-billionth of a second, and intensities on the order of several billion watts.”

The resurrection as a divine burst of light: I know that the eclipse is a natural phenomenon, but that pinpoint of light on Monday felt symbolic of resurrection. It was the splendor of return, of light renewed. That moment more than any other felt holy. And then came the gradual restoration of ordinary daylight, which no longer felt ordinary.

Freshmen, the imagery of your beginning at Wyoming Catholic College is all about light. The rest of your education, I’m sorry to tell you, will not be as dramatic as the total eclipse of the sun on your 21-day backpacking expedition. Rather, it is going to be a matter of achieving light, of laboring to receive it. Emily Dickinson has a famous

short poem that begins, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” What does she mean by *slant*? She means to come at the truth not directly, like looking at the sun, but by means of indirection.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant
Success in circuit lies—
Too bright for our infirm delight
The truth’s—superb surprise.

Success in circuit lies—that is, by way of a curriculum, whose roots are in the circular course of a racetrack. Why “in circuit?” Because the truth is like the good in Plato’s etymological allegory of the cave, or like the face of God: it blinds those who have the hubris to think they can look directly into it. Dickinson’s second quatrain amplifies her point.

Like lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind—
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.

Over the course of four years, and many classes, many experiences in the wilderness or in choir or liturgy, the truth will show itself, but in such a way that you can receive it. You are here to be a student. Being a student begins with the active turn to knowledge in the confident sense that the eclipse of the good is ending and that Wyoming Catholic College participates in the return of light. You will not find it to be sudden, except for extraordinary moments of insight along the way, but through the gradual dazzling of your work here, you will find—even at the end of this first semester—a great difference in the way you see the world, and the world will find a great difference in you.

Dr. Glenn Arbery was born in South Carolina and grew up as a Protestant in Middle Georgia. His reading of Flannery O’Connor as a freshman at the University of Georgia began his journey toward the Roman Catholic Church. A convert at 25, he entered the Church at the University of Dallas, where he later took his Ph.D. He has taught literature at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in Merrimack, New Hampshire, the University of Dallas, and Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he held the d’Alzon Chair of Liberal Education. He also served as Director of the Teachers Academy at the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture and as an editor at People Newspapers in Dallas, where he won a number of regional and national awards for his writing. He has published two volumes with ISI Books, *Why Literature Matters* (2001) and *The Southern Critics* (2010), editor. He is also the editor of *The Tragic Abyss* (2003) for the Dallas Institute Press and *Augustine’s Confessions and Its Influence*, which will appear from St. Augustine Press in 2018.



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