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All the apostles are mentioned in Holy Scripture but only Peter is singled out by Jesus for a specialised role. He is without doubt *the most iconic figure of the early Church*.

In the gospel we see where Jesus made Peter Head of the Church, He and his successors were to be its focal point of unity and orthodoxy throughout history, preserving it from error. The authority which Jesus conferred on Peter, despite his sins and failings, is now invested in Pope Francis. The reformers of the 16th century suppressed the role of the Successor of St Peter but despite this, throughout history, he has stood head and shoulders over any other religious leader. When Pope Francis, for instance, went to Lisbon for World Youth Day a few weeks back, a million and a half young people were present. What other spiritual or political leader for that matter could draw such a large and diverse audience.

When Peter first set foot in Rome around 43 AD it was the centre of the Earth. 'All roads lead to Rome', they used say. Rome, where the Pope lives, is the centre of the Catholic world. Bernini's colonnade in front of St Peter's reminds us that the Catholic Church, like a mother with arms outstretched, embraces all peoples, all civilizations and all cultures. Catholic means 'all- embracing' and inclusive. There may have been a few dodgy popes throughout the Church's 2000 year history but the saintly ones far outnumber them. The Pope may be infallible but he's never claimed to be impeccable, as Peter, the first Pope knew only too well.

Saint Peter never tried to hide his human failures or struggles. He once asked our Lord to leave him because he was a sinful man. And then He wept bitterly after disowning Jesus in the early hours of Good Friday. At the Last Supper he refused point blank to have Jesus wash his feet. On another occasion Jesus compared Peter to Satan when he strongly suggested Jesus

ditch the Cross in favour of world renown. That would have pleased Satan mightily. Peter was on a learning curve as to the identity of Jesus. To be saviour of the world Jesus would have to embrace the cross, the very thing Peter didn't want him to do. But Peter would eventually have to go down that same road himself.

The night before he died Jesus said to Peter; " Simon, Simon, Satan had desired to sift you like wheat but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers" And after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost that is precisely what happened. The Spirit was shaping Peter up to be the leader the Lord had in mind for him and his successors. Peter's declared love for Jesus was the stimulus for his future mission which would culminate in laying down his life for Him.

Without Peter the Church would be like a school without a Head or a football match without a referee. Today we need Peter more than ever to keep us firmly anchored in the truth especially nowadays when there's so much falsehood being bandied about surrounding the human person. Without the Papacy the church would be severed from its roots and no longer command the respect of all people of goodwill.