

# Peter and Plato as cyberneticians

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*We are not Peripatetics, but fishermen.* This sentence aptly reflects the age-old dispute within the Church, between the influence of Greek philosophy, symbolized by Athens, and the Jewish faith and heritage, represented by Jerusalem. Does this dispute also explain the current crisis facing the Church: the question of leadership and governance in the Church, how to approach the challenges of artificial intelligence and digitalization? Should they be resolved like Aristotle or Plato, or like the simple fisherman, Saint Peter? This important question has implications for the specific challenges we face.

What is the role of the Dicastery for the Faith? How should synodality be understood? Which is more important, Greek democracy or Jewish hierarchy? This question is very relevant, and the answer to it determines the response to contemporary challenges. How should we argue, on the basis of philosophers, technologists, or the Holy Scriptures, or perhaps there is no need for argumentation, but everything should be accepted on faith. Two metaphors, Peter's boat and Plato's ship, illustrate two approaches to these problems. At the same time, they challenge conventional thinking about leadership.

## The Alternative:

Let's look at the alternative posed in the title. On the one hand, we have the parable of the Ship of State, where the disobedient crew considers the navigator to be a useless theorist who has nothing to say to them. They claim that anyone can steer the ship, and throw out the one who looked at the stars, condemning themselves to blindness and steering only from wave to wave, with no hope of reaching land.

On the other hand, there is a strong image of Peter's boat, from which Jesus taught, in which He called Him, which can be interpreted as the Church. It is steered by Saint Peter, a fisherman who knows his craft and loves his Master dearly, but, in terms of education, he is more like the helmsman in Plato's parable, blind and lame, than a philosopher-navigator.

However, he is able to do what Plato's navigator would never do, namely to get out of the boat and walk on the waves after Jesus. Interestingly, in the Gospels, the boat appears in a storm as a situation that exceeds the capabilities of the boat and the fishermen. What does this mean for contemporary leaders and ordinary citizens? Well, it shows us what mistakes not to make, and how to steer the boat in increased complexity and be guided not only by science, but also by something more, or not to neglect the crew.

## Two approaches:

### Plato:

Let's take a closer look at Plato's parable. We are in the seventh book of *The Republic*, and Plato wants to explain why philosophers are not respected in the state. The navigator is the King, who must lead an unreasonable crew. This text has become the basis for understanding how to govern a state. It shows the fundamental dilemma faced by those in power. Should they be guided by the will of the people, or by some objective reality? In other words, should they please the crew of the ship, or look at the stars and base their decisions on them? A historical example is Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. The Pope had to decide whether, for example, to be guided by the fact that many people use contraception and allow it, or to consider what attitude towards contraception is derived from Catholic doctrine, and act accordingly. The same applies to usury. Plato says here that the state must be governed by science and truth. Popper, who was one of Plato's greatest critics, argues that this approach gave rise to totalitarianism. Plato, considered the greatest philosopher, proposes that the ship be steered by the greatest minds.

## Peter:

When we look at St. Peter's fishing boat, the difference between Peter and Plato's philosopher-navigator is striking. Peter, a local businessman, a devout Jew who knows the basics of Greek, to the extent that he needs it to conduct business, did not write any treatises. Even the accounts of Christ's encounters were written down by Saint Mark. Peter does not act like a navigator who carefully plans, calculates and weighs things up, but more on the basis of instinct or inspiration. This testifies to his greatness, but it also becomes his problem. Some inspirations come from God: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*, others come from himself, from his idea of the church, *this will never happen to you*, and then he is sharply rebuked. If we look at the Gospel at the passage where Peter and the boat appear, a question about Jesus arises.

We have a triangle: Peter – Boat – Jesus. This question was also present in later dilemmas concerning the leadership of the Church. The question of who the Pope is was a question of whether he is a helmsman or a navigator, whether he sets the course or keeps watch over it. Anyway, as the Acts of the Apostles show, Peter does not try to get his way at all costs, but is open to criticism from St. Paul, and decides together with others at the Council of Jerusalem.

## Practice:

What does this mean in practice? How does this translate into leadership outside the context of the Church? Plato's approach can be compared to an expert approach. As a result of a theoretical analysis of the world of Ideas, we find the ideal proportions and solution. Then, the theorist proclaims this truth to the crew, for whom it is beyond their reach, and therefore they reject it. Specialists experience this very often: when scientists optimize, while politicians reject it without understanding it or trying to please the demos. Peter's approach is different. He does not know the solution, and cannot hope to arrive at it theoretically. So, he seeks advice from others, gauges opinions, and throws out ideas to see where they will lead him. As for the rule that guides Peter's conduct, it is based on faith. This is not to belittle Peter's abilities. St. John Chrysostom, in his [sermon](#), shows that he can be considered a greater philosopher than Plato.<sup>1</sup>

Plato, who uttered much nonsense during his lifetime, is now silent, while this man proclaims his teachings everywhere; not only among his compatriots, but also among the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, in India and in all parts of the world, to the ends of the earth. Where is Greece now with its great pretensions? Where is

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<sup>1</sup>Translated from: J. Walker, J. Sheppard and H. Browne, and revised by George B. Stevens. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/210104.htm>.

the name of Athens? Where is the nonsense of the philosophers? The one from Galilee, the one from Bethsaida, the uncouth peasant, has defeated them all. Are you not ashamed—admit it—of the very name of the country that defeated you? But if you hear his name and learn that he was called Cephas, you will hide your faces even more. You did not follow the path you should have chosen, but you left the royal road, so easy and smooth, and entered the difficult, steep, and arduous path. That is why you did not attain the kingdom of heaven.

Why, then, he asks, did Christ not influence Plato and Pythagoras? Because Peter's mind was much more philosophical than theirs. They were, in fact, children, tossed about by vain glory, but this man was a philosopher, capable of receiving grace. Peter wonders what Jesus Christ would have done, and also asks the Holy Spirit for an answer. Plato's Helmsman, on the other hand, is guided by facts, ideas, and reason. Can we say that Peter's style is more democratic and Plato's more hierarchical? Not really. Both styles have something of hierarchy and something of democracy. Plato tries to reach a solution through dialogue, and Peter does the same. Plato's authority comes from secret knowledge, Peter's from Revelation and practical experience.

### **When and why to use each of these solutions?**

Both solutions have their strengths and weaknesses. An approach based on expertise is necessary for technical solutions. Sending a mission to the moon, writing an encyclical on artificial intelligence. Environment-oriented leadership may be necessary when we want people's support. In a crisis situation, do we turn to a doctor or a friend? Experience shows that people should be involved at the project development stage.

An expert approach may overestimate its ability to predict; reality is sometimes too complex to be captured in detail in schemes, and even when this happens, there is no guarantee that decision-makers will agree to a very complex solution that they do not understand. On the other hand, a *happy-go-lucky* approach, where everything is done on a hunch, without analysis, without knowledge, just on the basis of "the nobility will get on their horses and somehow it will work out," can also make us like a gang of teenagers in a joint venture, but we lack knowledge of navigation, stars, and mathematics, and we will not reach the port. We need both a crew and a goal in sight.

However, these models do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can complement each other. Every project has a technical element, where expert knowledge is essential, and a human element, based on relationships, group thinking, conversation, and conflicts of values. Choosing solutions for issues that affect people are related to the sphere of values, so they cannot be based solely on a mathematical model, but we must clearly specify which values are most important to us.

Besides, both images can be treated as saying the same thing. Plato argues against the Sophists that one cannot be guided by the Demos when steering a ship, but must ask about

ideas, purpose, and truth. Peter, on the other hand, shows that it is important whether Jesus is in the boat to set the course. When Peter tries to manipulate the course, he receives harsh criticism, perhaps the harshest in the entire Bible: *Get behind me, Satan...*

## Conclusions:

– In the history of the Church, we have different approaches to leadership. – The two mentioned in this text refer to the two foundations of the Church, symbolized by two cities: Athens and Jerusalem. - Rome was able to integrate these two approaches. - These models are applicable to other social systems, so translating them into the language of management may prove useful.

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