

There was once a football player whose coach wanted him to improve during the offseason. The coach gave him a special videotape of all the errors the player had made during the year, hoping that by watching the tape, he would learn from his mistakes. Now, the very idea of seeing a miniseries of my professional mistakes from a given year would be enough to make me want to torch my VHS, but this player actually watched the tapes, and the following season was even worse than before. At the end of the year, the coach reversed the strategy, giving him a tape of what he did right, and by studying that, the player entered one of his best seasons ever.

I'm sure if you're a parent or a teacher, you can tell similar stories about children, how well they respond to affirmation. It's often surprising how much control our minds have over our actions. If we are filled with doubt or fear we falter much more than when we are confident.

It's surprising how much control faith has over our actions. For some reason, our faith seems strong when things are going well, but let some tragedy happen--a death in the family, a serious injury, divorce, rejection--and it challenges our faith. You can hear people in this situation say, "I never would have made it through, if it weren't for my faith;" or they may say, "This situation has really tried my faith." Tragedy creates fear. Faith can overcome tragedy, unless fear is stronger. Some people spiral downward: one crisis leads to another, to another. It can make a shipwreck of our faith, as St. Paul says.

People who doubt have a strange companion: Peter, the man we call the first pope of the Catholic Church. Peter was a fisher, he feared the power of the sea, the wind, and the waves. Yet even when Jesus was standing before him, even when Jesus was walking on water, even when Peter was walking on water, he doubted the power of Christ, because he feared the power of the wind. Jesus calls Peter a man of little faith; it is faith which overcomes fear.

Like a football player who wants to improve, we can learn to face tragedy not by dwelling on failure, but by building up confidence, not by succumbing to doubt, but by nourishing faith.

The Catholic Church has a long history of encouraging people to tend to their faith. By participating in Mass, receiving the sacraments, praying in private, praying with the family, supporting the Church, getting involved in the parish, we have many opportunities to nourish faith. An active Christian life gives us confidence in our faith, even when we feel like a ship tossed by the waves.

And if we lose confidence, we can remember that Peter did, too. Peter did not recognize Jesus, he did not trust the power of Jesus, he did not know that Jesus was praying while the storm arose, and he had forgotten that it was Jesus who asked him into the boat in the first place. If, like Peter, we forget or doubt; if, like Peter, we sink in the sea; if, like Peter, we haven't the faith to walk on water; like Peter, we may have faith to cry, "Lord, save me," and that is faith enough.