

## 21<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (August 27, 2023)

Another school year has begun, even with the extreme heat of this past week, and so we settle into its familiar rhythm. Our cluster religious education classes will begin shortly, and I look forward to visiting our students again when I can. One of the things I enjoy doing in those class visits is asking questions and seeing what they know—a sort of an ‘oral pop quiz’. In that spirit, I have a question for you (but don’t worry: I won’t ask for a show of hands): what leadership role—national or worldwide—has the longest history; which one has been around for the longest time?

If you paid attention to the gospel we just heard, you have a very strong clue with Jesus giving Peter a special and unique responsibility: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church”. If your answer is ‘the papacy—the office of the pope’, you’re right...and you passed the quiz with flying colors! Peter has long been referred to as the first pope. And while it’s true that we don’t find the word ‘pope’ anywhere in the Bible, it is just as true that we can trace the history of the papacy from Pope Francis all the way back in time to St. Peter himself in an unbroken line. That’s a nearly 2000-year-old institution—much longer than the office of U.S. president (a mere 230+ years old), and centuries older than the royal throne of England.

If there is one element of our Catholic faith that most distinguishes us from other churches or denominations, it is the papacy. The Eastern Orthodox churches are the closest to the Catholic Church in terms of faith and doctrine; they have the same seven sacraments we do, and they also have a strong devotion to Mary and the saints. But they do not acknowledge a single pope or any particular bishop as having leadership and authority of the Church around the world.

So why do we have a pope? Maybe you have faced that question from your non-Catholic friends or relatives. It’s important to remember here that, throughout salvation history, God has chosen certain individuals to exercise leadership in his name—think of Abraham and Moses, for example. In the first reading we hear of God giving Eliakim—who served the king of Israel—the ‘key of the House of David’, that is, the authority to make binding decisions. This brings us to today’s gospel; Jesus asked the apostles “who do you say that I am?” Peter answered: “you are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. Peter was right; he also passed his pop quiz with flying colors... Jesus then gave him his new name of Peter which means ‘rock’ in Aramaic, the everyday language spoken by Jesus and the Twelve. Jesus also gave Peter ‘the keys to the kingdom of heaven’ and told him whatever he binds or looses on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven.

There are other gospel passages that highlight the unique leadership role given by Jesus to Peter, but this passage from Matthew has special strength as the reason that we have the papacy. It was clearly established by Jesus as part of his plan to provide a sure and rock-solid foundation for the Church he wished to establish in order to bring his gospel to the whole world. And from the very earliest years of the Church’s life—even back in the first century itself—it was very clear that the successors of Peter, who came to be called the popes, were thought to have a leadership role held or shared by no other bishops. In the words of Vatican II: the pope, as the successor to Peter and the bishop of Rome, ‘is the ...visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful’ (Catechism, n. 882).

There is a whole lot of history and Scripture and theology regarding the papacy, but the bottom line is: we have a pope; Jesus established his Church on the rock of St. Peter, because he loves us. Jesus loves us enough to give us guidance and direction on what is true and real, and on how to live so as to know what real joy and genuine happiness is all about. Jesus promised the apostles more than once that he

would send them the Holy Spirit to remind them what he taught and to lead them to all truth. And he promised his protection for them in their work of teaching and preaching; in particular, he promised Peter that the ‘gates of the netherworld’ would never prevail against this Church. Parents, why do you teach your children about right and wrong, about what is good or harmful? You do that because you love your children, and thus you want them to know what is true and good and you want to protect them from harm and evil.

Just so, the pope has the Christ-given responsibility to lead and direct the Church’s task of teaching the family of God—the Church. God loves us enough; in fact he loves us so much that he gives us sure guidance and direction through his Church to reach our goal of eternal life and joy in his kingdom. Have the popes been perfect or sinless throughout history? Of course not—history clearly shows that the chair of St. Peter has been occupied at times (especially back in the Middle Ages) by some really unsavory characters. And let’s remember that Peter himself—the rock on which Jesus built his Church—had his flaws. He was sometimes headstrong, other times cowardly—he even lied three times in saying that he never even knew Jesus when confronted after Jesus’ arrest. Peter knew himself to be a sinful man, and he was right about that. Nonetheless, Jesus chose him to be that rock foundation for his Church and promised his direction and protection for that Church—and Jesus, as always, was and is good for his word.

The grace of God sustained and strengthened Peter to fulfill his leadership role; that same grace sustains and strengthens Pope Francis as it did his predecessors all the way back to Peter to teach truly and authentically the whole of the Catholic faith and to do so without error. Thanks be to God for loving us enough to give us that sure guidance and true teaching. And I ask you to please pray for Pope Francis, the 266<sup>th</sup> successor to St. Peter—he has the most challenging job in the entire world. In fact, the pope often asks us all to pray for him since he knows his own weakness and his need for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. That kind of honesty and humility is a real credit to him, and so let’s all pray for the Holy Father, and let’s do so every day—he needs and deserves our prayers.