

45 Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A August 23, 2020
Isaiah 22:15,10-23 Psalm 138 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

In today's Gospel we read that at Caesarea Philippi Jesus has appointed Peter as His successor and the leader of His new Catholic Church. Christ has faith and confidence in Peter, and entrusts him with a very important mission which is crucial for the continuation of His work. To lead His Church, Jesus establishes four authorities and powers for Peter.

The first authority of Christ's Church is that it will be built on Peter, the *Rock*. Jesus confers on Simon the name "Peter," or *Kephas* in Jesus' Aramaic language, which means "rock." Jesus is saying that Peter will be like a rock, a durable solid foundation giving the Church the firm and stable leadership it will need in the years ahead until the end of time. This rock will be the solid foundation of the church, which Jesus is about to set on earth to carry on His mission for His people.

The second authority of Christ's Church is that the power of hell will not defeat it. Jesus says, "The gates of hell will not prevail against it." The gates will not close in upon the Church Christ has established. In other words, no power on earth or Satan will be able to destroy the Church.

The third sign of Peter's authority and power involves *keys*. Jesus says to Peter, "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.*" In giving the keys to Peter, Jesus is saying that Peter will be the new "master of the palace" in the heavenly Kingdom Jesus is building.

In giving the keys to Peter, Jesus is saying, "*you, Peter, will be the one in charge of my Church on earth. You will be vested with My very authority so that you will shepherd the people in My name.*"

These symbolic keys have been passed on down to the Popes of the Church throughout history, to our Pope today. Just as our keys open the doors to our homes, so do the keys Peter received open the doors to Jesus' Kingdom.

Our present Pope Francis stands as the current "Vicar of Christ" and the Shepherd of God's people of our Roman Catholic Church. Our Pope today is the bearer of "the keys" to Christ's Kingdom. In sharing this royal office, the Pope is Christ the King's representative in our Catholic Church.

The fourth sign is that Peter is granted special authority, “Whatsoever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” In this authority Peter and his future successors are given the authoritative teaching power of *faith and morals* in Christ’s Church. The Pope does not create or invent truth. He hands on and applies the truth of Jesus Christ to our lives today.

It is without doubt that these four authorities that Jesus gives to Peter are definitely some of the most important passages of the Gospel. Nowhere else does Jesus extend all four of these authorities to the other Apostles. They all understand that Peter is being singled out for special authority as leader of the Church established by Christ. In giving these powers to Peter and to his successors, Jesus is planning for all future members of His church.

Jesus is not simply speaking to an individual, Peter, but He is creating the office of the Holy Father to continue in His Church until the end of time. That office has two purposes, to *ignite* and to *unite*.

First, to *ignite*. The Holy Father is the centre of a worldwide Catholic Church that embraces every nationality and is the oldest institution in the world, our link back to Christ. The office of the Holy Father is a living office that has shaped the past, is shaping the present, and will shape the future. He speaks the apostolic faith that was handed down from Christ to the Apostles and on to us today. The apostolic faith should be part of the formation of our lives.

Do we honour and respect the Holy Father enough to embrace the apostolic faith he teaches when it comes to sexual morality, abortion and the sacredness of human life, human rights, same sex marriage and our Catholic identity? He hands on and applies the truth of Jesus Christ to our lives today to *ignite* that faith in us, to fan the flame of faith to burn more intensely. That is his mission.

Our Lord gave us the office of the Holy Father also to *unite*. The Holy Father reminds us that we are one Body in Christ, part of a huge community of faith, a vast network of spiritual life, support and prayer. We are not separate individuals, separate parishes, separate dioceses and separate countries. We are part of the one, Universal Church that lives in and through all of us. We will profess these words in our Creed: “*I believe in one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.*”

The Pope is the point of *unity* as a Church, our unity with each other and with Christ. The Pope is given the power of the keys not primarily to keep people out but to bring people into the Kingdom of Heaven, to open the truth of the Gospel to all people.

The rock of Christ is with us today in our Church. We can really be on fire for our God and be solid rocks of our Lord even in our day in this time of the coronavirus pandemic. Our Lord God wants us to be faithful witnesses here on this earth. Like Peter, we can bring Christ's message of hope to those who need it most. It is in this way Peter's story becomes our story too.

We too are entrusted with keys of being leaders in Christ's Church. God, through our Baptism, especially as we struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic, summons each one of us to carry out His mission whether it be in our home or our community. It is through our personal Catholic leadership and efforts that the mission of Christ's Church continues in building the kingdom of God.

As a Church, we have a great gift in the office of the Holy Father, an office given to *ignite* and to *unite*, to set us on fire for Christ and to join us together as a Church. In a world that grows cold and divided and hostile, that can so easily drift from the Truth, we need places and instruments of *unity*. In a world of so much artificial image making, in the Pope we have a rock, the rock of Christ's Truth which will keep us anchored to Christ in any kind of storm.

When we are united with the Holy Father we can be sure we are united with Christ in the work you and I have to accomplish here on earth. That is the gift Christ gave us that afternoon in a place called Caesarea Philippi.