

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus poses a question to his disciples, "*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*" They immediately replied, "*Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*" He then asked them the critical question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" Simon Peter answered for all of them, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

This dialogue helps us understand the stages in our journey of faith. The first two stages of faith respond to Jesus' first question. The first stage of faith is experienced or familial faith, the faith we experience or learn in our families as small children. The second stage of faith is affiliative faith, the faith of the community of which we are part. For example, when I was in grade school, we all had a great sense of belonging to the Little Flower community and the Catholic Church. Our faith was the faith we were taught by the priests and sisters.

The third stage of faith is searching or questioning faith. This stage often takes place during adolescence and young adulthood.

The fourth stage of faith is personal or owned faith. This stage represents adult faith. It is each person's answer to Jesus' second question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" It implies a personal relationship with Jesus. After Peter's profession of faith, Jesus said, "*And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church...*" Therefore, personal or owned faith also involves the personal decision to belong to and to be active in a faith community or church even while recognizing and accepting that both the church and the individuals within the Church are imperfect. According to the book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, owned Catholic faith would include being "a conscious disciple of Jesus Christ, a fully initiated Catholic, and an active parishioner."¹

Today Catholics face many challenges to their Catholic faith. First, not everyone moves through the four stages of faith. For example, the faith of some Catholics has never moved beyond what they learned in grade school. Likewise, others never get beyond questioning faith. Both of these groups struggle with faith when they are confronted by imperfection in the Church.

A second challenge comes from Jesus' words in today's Gospel: "*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" With these words, Jesus conferred authority on Peter. He would later bestow the same authority on the rest of the apostles. People today have a hard time accepting any authority outside themselves. To put it in our terms, we do not like to be told what to believe or how to act. We may not agree with all the Church's teachings. We may have problems with the decisions of Church leaders, from the Pope, to bishops, to priests, to parish councils. Our resistance to authority can challenge our Catholic faith.

Finally, faith requires us to embrace mystery. As today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans suggests, God is mystery: "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!*" Because God is mystery, our Christian faith raises as many questions as it answers. Because God is mystery, we have to live with a certain amount of ambiguity. For example, we struggle with the mystery of evil and mystery of suffering. Because of mystery, some people will lose their faith, and some will leave the Catholic Church. Already in 1982, in his book *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt predicted the continued growth of evangelical and independent churches: "During turbulent times many people need structure—not ambiguity—in their lives. They need something to hang on to, not something to debate."² In other words, they are looking to their faith and their churches for answers, not more questions.

My brothers and sisters, to deal with these and other challenges to our faith, we need to have faith in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, we have to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the foundation of our faith. As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" [14:6].

¹Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2012), p. 54.

²John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming our Lives*, (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1982), p. 240.