

21st Sunday per Annum - A
Isaiah 22:19-23;
Romans 11:33-36;
Matthew 16:13-20
Little Flower - 8/23/20

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel suggests several separate homilies or one very long homily. Therefore, today I will simply highlight several different themes.

At the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus asked 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 more important question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" In other words, what Jesus was really asking was "*Who am I to you?*" Peter then responded, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*" Although Peter spoke for the disciples, his answer was rooted in his personal faith in Jesus.

Faith develops in four stages. The faith of a small child is the faith of his or her parents. Children believe what their parents believe. The first stage of faith is, then, familial faith. The second stage of our faith journey is affiliative faith. As our world expands beyond our family, our faith is the faith of our extended family—our peer group, our school, our Church. During adolescence, we enter into the stage of searching or questioning faith. Finally, if our faith continues to develop, our faith becomes our own. We answer with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Unfortunately, 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 the realities of life and the realities of Church.

After Peter's response, Jesus said to Peter, "*And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church...*" First, Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter which actually means rock. In effect, Jesus is saying, "You are rock, and upon this rock I will build my church." In both the Old and New Testaments, when God changed someone's name, he was giving them a new and important role in the community. This passage is one of three times when Jesus assigned Peter a special role. This is significant.

Fr. Richard McBrien suggests that it is our commitment to the Petrine ministry, the Papacy, that distinguishes the Catholic Church from all other Christian communities. Although it is clear in the Gospels that Jesus chose twelve apostles, it is equally clear that Jesus gave Peter a special role even among the Apostles. It is part of Catholic faith that the Pope is the successor to St. Peter.

Jesus then went on to say to Peter, "*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.*" Keys are a symbol of authority. Binding and loosing are rabbinical terms that refer to imposing obligations and removing obligations. Interestingly, two chapters later Jesus gave the same authority to bind and to loose to the other apostles. Today we have a very difficult time with anyone telling us what we have to believe or what we have to do. Therefore, many people simply dismiss certain Church teachings and rules as not relevant for their lives. However, Jesus himself gave the Church, specifically Peter and the apostles and now the Pope and bishops, real authority to teach and to make laws.

My brothers and sisters, St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "*For from him and through him and for him are all things.*" In a parallel verse in his Letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote, "*all things were created through him and for him... and in him all things hold together*" [1:16c & 17b]. If all things hold together in Jesus, then if Jesus stopped loving us even for an instant, we would cease to exist. Therefore, these verses remind us that no matter what Jesus never stops loving us.