

21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Matthew 16:13-20

“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it” (*Mt.* 16:18). When the Lord made St. Peter the rock upon which He built His Church he chose a man who embodied all the strengths and the weaknesses that the Gospels proclaim. He was not chosen because he was perfect, he was chosen because the Lord trusted him—knowing very well that the same man on whom He founded His Church would be the same man who would deny Him. In being given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Lord gives to St. Peter the authority and the power to open the gates of paradise to all men and women—the gates closed by the sin of Adam and Eve. The power of the keys is the power to bind and to loose; to say what stays and what goes, what is forgiven and what is not forgiven, what is truth and what is a lie. In St. Peter we have the first Pope. St. Augustine wrote “Wherever there is Peter, there is the Church.” The papacy was Our Lord’s idea, not man’s.

The Church was never and is not a democracy. We do not vote on what is true and what is false as though truth was changeable and that truth is only truth if the majority of people believe it. The Church is a kingdom ruled by God who is our Father and we are the heirs to that kingdom. And so that generations after Our Lord may know the intimate love that God has for His Church, He chose St. Peter the Apostle to stand in His place on earth, which is why we call the Pope the Vicar of Christ on Earth. It is a means of care that was known throughout the ancient world as we heard in the first reading. Hezekiah, the King of Judah, delegated his authority to a “master of the palace,” first Shebna and then Eliakim. The “master of the palace” was given “the key of the House of David... should he open, no one shall close, should he close, no one shall open.” (see *Is.* 22:19-23). It is as it was when Christ said to St. Peter, “I will give

you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven" (*Mt. 16:19*). Our Lord gave to the Church the papacy as an instrument of unity and continuity so that the people of God, forged by God's grace and destined to overthrow Satan's rule of evil, may reign in the world and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

In Simon Our Lord chose he who was to be the foundation of the Church in whom was given the authority of God. He gave Simon the name Peter, which in Greek means "rock," and said that "on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it" (*Mt. 16:18*). In the failings of priests and people through 2,000 years we understand that, in part, the Church is human, but in the fact that the Church remains standing after 2,000 years, we know that she is divine.

Today it is Francis who holds the keys given to St. Peter by Our Lord and guides the Church on earth. Our Lord guides us through His Church, and the visible head of that Church is the Pope. He is not a political leader or authoritarian patriarch. He is to be our spiritual father, appointed and guided by Our Lord to keep the teachings of Christ pure and to apply it faithfully to the changing times and circumstances of history. The word "Pope" comes from the Greek word for father, "pappas", and so we call the Pope the Holy Father so that we will always be reminded that we are a member of God's household and an adopted child of God. The Holy Father is to stand to guard the truth revealed to us in Christ from all contradiction and violence, to guard the grace of God against the sin of Satan so that we may see in the Pope one who defends Christ for the sake of us and defends us for the sake of Christ.

Let us pray always for the Holy Father that he may be guided by the Holy Spirit and protected by the grace of God so that gathered around him we may be gathered around Christ, and so that in the Church on earth we may see the Kingdom of Heaven.