

Rev. Derek Fairman

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time A

This Sunday the Church reminds us of the words of the Lord Jesus to St. Peter, that the Lord gave Simon a new name, Peter, and upon the rock of Peter the Lord Jesus would build His Church. It is by reason of St. Peter's confession of faith, namely that the Lord Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, that St. Peter is the one to whom the Lord gave the keys of the Kingdom and upon which the Lord would build His Church.

In the earliest history of the Church, the papacy was not always at the forefront. Theological controversies were addressed by the Emperor at Constantinople, who convened the bishops of the world to settle the controversies. Emperor Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea. Emperor Theodosius II convened the Council of Ephesus, because he was dealing with his wife Eudoxia and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, on one side, and his sister St. Pulcheria and St. Cyril of Alexandria, on the other.

The Lord raised up great saints to meet these challenges: St. Athanasius, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Basil, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus. There were, unfortunately, some bishops and priests who were overcome by pride, and fell into error: Arius, a priest of Alexandria; Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople; Eutyches, a priest of Alexandria. We can appreciate that during those times, it was difficult to know what to make of all these controversies. We have the benefit of hindsight now, but back then there was much that was uncertain. Many people did not have extensive theological training, and the ones who did have that background could be confused.

There is one bishop who has never erred, who was always true to the one apostolic faith amid the controversies. This is the Bishop of Rome, what they called back then, "Old Rome," as opposed to Constantinople as the New Rome. Throughout these struggles to understand the Lord Jesus, His relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and how He can be both God and man, the Bishop of Rome is the one who always defended the truth.

The historical evidence exists. Sometimes in different publications claiming to be historical, these issues are treated as if they were heavily influenced by political considerations, or that somehow the decisions of the councils were motivated by something other than a search for the truth. Granted, the emperors could *convene* councils for political reasons: that is, they did not want to see their empire torn apart, but that does not mean that the bishops did not seek truth.

There is plenty of historical evidence that the Bishop of Rome remained true to the faith of the Apostles. This was true before the papacy had the influence that it has today. Yes, the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven were given to St. Peter, and that means that the papacy has a divine institution. Yet, besides that, the papacy also has the *experience* of being faithful, and providing guidance, and demonstrating that divine institution. The papacy is not an example of might makes right, which some historians may want to argue. That is not true of the papacy or the Church in general. Rather, being right has expanded that moral foundation.

Some people want to argue that somehow the papacy is a burden, or that the hierarchy is a burden, that somehow such organization is something negative. Granted, the Church, like many other things, has an organization to it that can seem burdensome at times. The Church's organization is not perfect. But the positives in the Church greatly outweigh the negatives. It can be easy to focus upon the negatives in life, but when we take a step back, the positive things in life outweigh the negative.

The papacy is a gift to the Church. Again, there have been times in the Church whenever this did not seem to be the case. There have been popes who did not live up to the office or even to the call to be Christian. Yet if we look back to the history of the Church, there have been times of confusion, times when our Catholic faith was not clear, not because someone proclaimed the exact opposite of the Gospel, but because someone muddied the waters, or someone claimed to have a new insight or a new "take" on the Gospel.

During these times, the Bishop of Rome has been that gift to the Church that was needed. The Lord raised up great saints to meet the challenge as well. The Bishop of Rome ensures that whatever new ideas are proposed conform to the rock of the Church, the faith that we have in the Lord Jesus. New ideas must be subjected to scrutiny, to separate the good from the bad, so that the good can be retained, and if there is something bad, it can be removed.

If we build our house on the rock of the Church's faith, then we can be faithful, and we can find peace in our own lives. When we look at our lives, what are the foundations in our lives? What are so many other things in our lives built upon? As we approach the altar, we ask the Lord to put the foundation of our souls upon the Lord Jesus. With so many different ideas and points of view in our society, it can be difficult to navigate our way through them. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus has not left us alone, but He has provided the light of truth through the office of St. Peter. We thank Him and we ask Him to guide us.