

3rd Sunday in Easter + 4 May 2025 + Act 5:274-32, 40-41 + Jn 21:1-19

Today's Gospel, together with this week's upcoming conclave gives us the unique opportunity to reflect on a topic that might not seem all that relevant to our daily lives, and that is the papacy. And yet, I imagine all of us have family members, friends, or co-workers that are not Catholic or have left the Church, and so these days when the papacy is frequently in the news, it is important for us to know what and why we believe what we do about the pope. So there are 3 important aspects of the papacy I'd like to focus on today.

First, where does the whole notion of the papacy come from? To answer that question, we look to Matthew's Gospel, ch 16. The crowds have many differing opinions on who Jesus really is, and so He asks the disciples who *they* think He is. Simon replies to Him on their behalf: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.* So Jesus replies, affirming his answer: *Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. 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.* (vv.16-19)

Simon's new name "Peter" comes from the Greek "Petros," which is a noun meaning "rock." And there are many instances in the Scriptures where God changes a person's name when He has a special mission for that person. In particular, in the Old Testament, God changes Abram's name (which meant *exalted father*), to *Abraham*, meaning *father of a multitude*. Just as Abraham was to become the founder of God's People under the Old Covenant, so Peter will be the leader of the People of God under the New Covenant; that is, the Church.

There is another Old Testament reference at play here, and that is the notion of the "keys" to the Kingdom of Heaven. In the ancient Near East, a king would sometimes entrust his prime minister with authority by the symbol of handing over keys. We hear of this action in the book of the Prophet Isaiah, ch. 22, where Shebna, the unfaithful Master of the Palace of David, is replaced by a man named Eliakim. To him, the Lord says through the Prophet Isaiah: *I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; what he opens, no one will shut, what he shuts, no one will open* (v. 22). So Jesus, the new David, is bestowing upon his "prime minister" Peter the authority of his keys. This passage also helps explain what is meant by "binding" and "loosing;" that is, the authority to make binding interpretations of the law, to include or exclude members from the Church, and, as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel, to even forgive sins in God's name.

Now, some protest that Jesus is only referring to Peter's profession of faith here, and not to his person. But these arguments don't fit the logic of the actual text, nor do they take into account the Old Testament precedents for what is happening here. At their root, these

protests ultimately stem from a discomfort, if not outright hostility to the reality that God chooses to bestow upon a mere man such an extraordinary degree of authority. Which brings us to our 2nd point: how much authority does the pope really have?

Without going into many important nuances here, we can say: according to the Catechism, the Pope has *infallibility in virtue of his office* when *he proclaims, by a definitive act, a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals* (891). Most of the Pope's daily teachings do not rise to the level of a 'definitive act.' According to Vatican II, the way we know the "level" of the Pope's teaching is by considering the *character of the documents, his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or his manner of speaking* (LG25). And just as there are various levels of degree of authority of teachings, there are various levels of degree of assent we need to give them. For example, we must give the highest degree of assent on matters foundational to our faith, such as the articles of the Creed. On the other hand, while we should always give the pope respectful consideration, we might disagree with matters of prudential judgement, such as the Pope's views on tax policy or the root causes of climate change.

Because while the Holy Spirit prevents the Pope from erring when he teaches definitively on matters of faith and morals, the Pope is not sinless, and he can make prudential errors. Immediately after Jesus commissions Peter as the foundation stone of His Church, He has to rebuke Peter for *thinking not as God does, but as human beings do* (Mt 16:23). Peter denied even knowing the Lord 3 times on the night of the Passion. It took time and hard training for Peter to become the man who would put his own life on the line by boldly proclaiming before the Sanhedrin in our 1st reading today: *we must obey God rather than men*. We should always pray for the pope, because he, like every pastor, is constantly subject to the temptation to think like the world rather than God, and to choose popularity over truth.

And that brings us to our 3rd point: what is the "role" of the Pope? Well, according to Jesus, in addition to binding and loosing, he has two further duties. At the Last Supper, knowing all that was about to happen, Jesus says to Peter: *Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers* (Lk 22:31-32). The Pope is called to strengthen the pastors of the Church in their ministry, primarily by upholding and teaching faithfully the saving deposit of faith that comes to us not from man, but from God.

And finally, as Jesus says 3 times in our Gospel today in response to Peter's 3-fold denial, Peter is called to *feed my sheep*. The Pope is not called to be a global celebrity, a political leader, or to have an answer to every human problem. Even more, the flock is not his. As we will hear in our Gospel next Sunday, the flock of the Church belongs to Christ, the Good Shepherd. The Pope does not set the agenda or mission of the Church; Christ has already done that. Rather, he, like all of us, is called to humbly obey the Lord's command: *follow me*.