

Pastor's Pen: The Point of Being In the Church

The following is an extended reflection on a homily I gave on Thursday for the Feast of the Chair of St Peter: It is greatly influenced by the book we are using for Chesterton Society (The Mystical Body of Christ by Archbishop Fulton Sheen), a series on the Eucharist we are doing for Java and Jesus, a book I am reading by Cardinal Robert Sarah on the priesthood, and on the Church's understanding of the feast itself.

In Rome sits a chair in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Cathedral of Rome. It is a chair that only the bishop of Rome (aka the Pope) may sit in. It is called the cathedra (hence a church having a cathedra is called a cathedral). So, are we celebrating that chair, that piece of furniture? Not really.

Is it a celebration of the person that sits in that chair? Not really. But both are part of it.

So, what is celebrated? Why break up the purple of Lent and add a gloria?

The answer is in the Gospel, Matthew 16:13-19. We see Jesus ask his apostles, "Who do you say that I am?" One can almost see Simon blurt out, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This is, as Jesus points out, a revelation that must come from God the Father. Jesus renames Simon, Peter, whose profession of faith will be the rock on which the Church is to be built. Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom. This would give him a specific role within the kingdom. The keeper of the keys sat at the left of the king. He could exercise the authority of the king, but always in union with the king. The keeper of the keys (think something like a prime minister) had to act in union with the king. If he didn't, as we see in Isaiah, the keys would be taken from him and given to another (Isaiah 22: 15-19).

This authority given by Christ to Peter is an extension of His own authority given to Him by the Father. An assembly (ecclesia in Greek, church in English) is founded on this delegated authority. This Church, founded on the day of Pentecost by the infusion of the Holy Spirit, is the extension of the mission Christ starts in His earthly life; a mission He sets us on with the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. We become His physical body on earth. He solidifies this Body with His own Flesh and Blood through the Eucharist.

The Church, including the papacy, has the charge of the proclamation of the Gospel (teach all that I taught you), the salvation of souls (go baptize the nations), and by her life showing the mercy and charity of God. All three are always at play. Because the authority is derived from Christ for the specific mission, He set us on, from the pope to the smallest member, we are obliged to teach, preach, and live in union with the Gospel. (See Matthew 28:16-20.)

We? Yes, we. Why? Because at our baptism we are brought into a living organism known as the Mystical Body of Christ. We don't join the Church as we would a fraternal order or a club, but we are grafted on the Body as a branch is grafted on a vine (I think ...think...maybe Jesus uses this very example in the Farewell Discourse) (see John 15:1-8) so that the Blood that coursed through His veins courses through ours (think about that the consequences of the reception of the Eucharist) so that we stay united with the mission He set us on. To see that mission as secondary to our own pursuits says to Christ, "No thanks, I got my own thing going."

No doubt, some will be tempted to say ... but Pope X, or Bishop X, or Father X does or doesn't do this. Resist that temptation right now. The purpose of a homily is self-reflection of how I or you as an individual act in union as a member of the living Body of Christ, His Church. Do we as individuals give forth fruit? Who has come into the Church because of my living out and proclaiming the Gospel of Christ? Am I a living member of the Body whose unity is symbolized by the chair of Peter? It is how I or you do this that will become the basis of our own particular judgment before God.

In our Chesterton Society meeting last week, I made the point that the Church is evangelical in nature: in other words, we are to seek out those who are not with us as an act of love and mercy. Being the Mystical Body, we must share in the vision of Christ who pointed away from Himself and to the Father and who did what He did out of love for us. Last week, a number of us went to the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis as a pilgrimage. During the tour, the guide said, "This Church was built to draw the eyes up." That is true on many levels: who we are as a parish should lift people's eyes up to the heavens and should shift our glance from ourselves to beyond ourselves. In other words, our worship should point to God and our charity towards others. Only then can we become the center of mercy and charity we are called to become.

Too many times we look to earth. We see our roles and happiness only in the same terms as a non-believer. When how we set our priorities is indistinguishable from an unbeliever, how can we be effective in the mission to which Christ set us?! We abandon the mission and replace it with a mission in opposition to the Great Commission. This failure is why our parishes falter and weaken.

It is easy to point out how others, even clergy, don't live up to this standard and use it as an excuse of why we don't engage in the mission of Jesus. Hogwash!! I point to the opening collect of this day, "Grant, we pray almighty God, that no tempest (storm) may disturb us, for you have set us fast on the rock of St Peter's confession of faith." The greatest saints have come in the most tumultuous times of our history (yesterday's saint, St Peter Damian is a great example of that); waiting for pristine conditions before we do the work of the salvation of souls is a sorry excuse and a condition that will NEVER happen. Never. The mission of the Church first handed to St. Peter and his brother apostles lives today as the living Mystical Body of Christ does.

My role as a pastor, as one who has been delegated with a portion of the authority Christ gives to St. Peter and his successors, is to get each and every one of us engaged in the mission Christ Himself handed to us. That means I will have to ask for people to make hard decisions and rethink priorities. Do I feel timid about this? No, not at all. What we were handed comes from the hands of Jesus, who made harder decisions, particularly at Gethsemane, that most will never have to. His priorities were always to our good. What we do is an imitation of Christ.