

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A-2026

In our Gospel reading, Jesus Christ proclaims to Simon: “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.” Through these words, Jesus personally established the church. The Church of which He is the ultimate Head and Shepherd. This revelation from Jesus reveals three important truths that are sometimes denied or rejected by those inside and outside the church.

The first truth is that the Catholic Church is of divine origin. It was established by none other than Jesus Christ who is simultaneously fully human and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. In today’s cultural and religious climate, it is good to be reminded of this truth because many are those who contend that it is simply a human-made institution. We live in a rather anti-church and anti-organized religion environment.

Jesus also confirms its supernatural origin through His promise that “The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” The last two thousand years of history seem to confirm the validity of this divine promise. The church has survived wars, persecutions, and martyrdom. It has survived internal divisions, people leaving the church all together or for other Christian traditions or religions, and the rejection of doctrines and dogmas and teaching other’s things contrary to church teaching. It has survived infidelity, betrayal, and its fair share of scandal.

Without Jesus Christ being the Head and Founder of His Church, we would have gone out of business long ago. Both our surviving and thriving through the storms and squalls of human and church history reveal that there is much more to the church than meets the eye. The Pharisee Gamaliel was onto something when in the Acts of the Apostles, and speaking about Christians, proclaims: “For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself, but if it comes from God, you will not be

able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting God.” Things that make you go hmmmm.

The second truth is we cannot separate our relationship with Jesus Christ from our relationship with the church. It’s a divinely revealed both/and, not an either/or. We are to experience Jesus not only through our personal prayer, Scripture reading, and our daily walk with Him. We are also called and required to experience Him in and through His Body, His Bride the Church. We are to experience Him in the sacraments. We are meant to experience Him more habitually through the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. May the following words of Jesus continually resound in the deepest depths of our souls: “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” Not to mention “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.” The catch is that we can only have these experiences by actively sharing in the life of the church.

The third truth is that union with the Pope is union with Christ. We can't just take or leave the Pope. Jesus Christ built His church on the rock of St. Peter. This spiritual authority was not given exclusively to Peter. It also included every person who would be the successor of Peter until Jesus Christ comes again in His glory. This primary authority within the church was recognized from the beginning by Jesus Christ Himself, the early Christian communities, and every succeeding generation of Catholic Christians. Eventually this spiritual office became known as the Papacy. Popular titles that became associated with it include the Pope, the Holy Father, and the Vicar of Jesus Christ.

All this means that Jesus Christ personally created the spiritual office of the papacy. It is of divine origin. To St. Peter and all of his successors, Jesus addresses these words: "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." The power of binding and loosing given to the Pope involves the areas of governance of

the church, the administration of the sacraments, and the proclamation of the truth. He seeks to do so in collaboration with the Bishops(who are successors to the Apostles), the clergy, theologians, religious, and laity. The Pope is the final decision maker, but he values the wisdom, expertise, and the life experience, of the whole of God's people.

One of the main ministries of the Pope is to confirm us in the truth of the Gospel and official church teaching on matters of faith and morality. As Catholics we believe that if we are united with the Pope in belief and in living out the faith, we are united with Christ and His Church. If we are not united, our union with Christ and the Church can be negatively affected. Depending on the type and seriousness of the issue, we may put ourselves fully outside of communion with the Church and seriously jeopardize our eternal salvation.

Having said this, there is a difference between the personal opinion of the Pope and official church teachings as defined in the Catechism, Church councils, and certain encyclicals. Encyclicals, and other writings or speeches of the Pope, are only

binding on our consciences if they affirm or elaborate on settled doctrine and dogma. If they just address current world events or new ideas, they are less binding or not binding. Examples include the Pope's personal perspective and approach to immigration, the environment, and the economy. At the same time, we owe his perspective our religious respect, prayerful reflection, and diligent study. That is unless it is clearly stated that this is new or updated church doctrine. Then it would become binding for us.

Since Jesus Christ founded the Church, He has provided it with all the gifts that promote our intimacy with Him and that assist us in working out our eternal salvation. These gifts include the Sacred Scriptures; the Sacraments; prayers and devotions; the Magisterium (Pope and Bishops in union with Him); church teaching; the prayers, writings, and example of the saints, especially the Blessed Mother; sacramentals; and the community of believers. May we avail ourselves of all these gifts of grace as we strive to grow in our communion with Jesus Christ and His church and work out our eternal salvation.

In light of today's Gospel, may we come to a renewed commitment to pray for, respect, and listen to, Pope Leo XIV, the rock on which the church of Jesus Christ is presently built. May he be holy. May he confirm us in the truth. May he embody for us the living presence of Jesus Christ, as the universal shepherd of the church.