

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

August 23, 2020

Isaiah 22:19–23 • Romans 11:33–36 • Matthew 16:13–20

I.

As you may know,
this year the Diocese of Richmond is commemorating its bicentennial.

It is among the seventh oldest dioceses in the United States.

This church has been the cathedral of the Richmond Diocese for 113 years,
since Thanksgiving Day, 1906.

Before the dedication of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart,
the cathedral church was St. Peter's (1834–1906),
located just a few blocks away, across from Virginia State Capitol.

Normally, when a new cathedral is built,
the title or name of the original church is transferred to the new one.

But Augustine van de Vyver, the sixth bishop of Richmond (1889–1911)—
his coat of arms is on the ceiling above the south transept—
did something different.

Bp. Van de Vyver obtained permission from the Vatican
to name the new cathedral in honor of the Sacred Heart,
out of deference for the name of the existing local parish,
which new cathedral would absorb.

Still, there appear to be two links in this church to the first cathedral.

There is a statue of St. Peter, holding the keys,
in the ambulatory (the curved perimeter of the sanctuary).

And among the stained-glass windows depicting the life of Christ,
which were installed for this cathedral's 50th anniversary in 1956,
there is one, near the front door, called, "The Power of the Keys."

The statue and stained-glass window of St. Peter are probably an homage to the first cathedral, whose title was an important mark of Catholic identity in a non-Catholic area like Richmond.

II.

The territory of the Richmond Diocese remains a non-Catholic area—very much a mission field.

Even today, Catholics constitute only five percent of the population.

Catholics have always been a minority, but today, increasingly, we are a double minority.

We are a minority in the following, second sense: the world around us is increasingly secular, and sometimes even hostile to institutional religion.

As you know, more and more Americans, especially young people, describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

And often other Christians, and even Catholics themselves, say that the Catholic Church is too “institutional,” and “has too many rules.”

III.

Those considerations take us to today’s Gospel.

There, St. Peter professes the essential Christian faith:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

This faith is not the result of Peter’s own brilliant insight; it is a revelation from God:

“Jesus said to him in reply,
‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,
but my heavenly Father.’”

In correctly identifying Jesus as the Messiah and a divine person,
he professes the faith of all believers of Jesus.

For that reason,
Peter's profession of faith is the basis of the Church.

It is Peter's divinely revealed faith—
not his imperfect character—
that is the foundation or "rock" of the Christian community:

“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.”

Peter and the other apostles are the link between Jesus and the Church;
Christ founds the Church on them.

Therefore, the institution of the Church is not something that comes after Jesus;
he is the one who inaugurates it.

The authority and institution of the Church come from the Son of God himself.

This means that the Church is both divine and human.

Divine because the Christian faith, as professed by Peter, comes from God,
and because Christ affirms this truth about himself.

But the Church is also human because of its imperfect and sinful members,
beginning with the apostles.

St. Peter himself, soon after this profession of faith, will falter,
as he refuses to accept Jesus' prediction that the Son of God must suffer.

Peter will then deny Christ three times during the Passion;
Judas Iscariot will betray Jesus;
and the other apostles, except for one,
will abandon Christ during his crucifixion.

Jesus knew that all of that would happen to his Church; he predicted it.

But the same Christ rehabilitates Peter and the other apostles after his resurrection.

They go on to do great things for the Church, while remaining imperfect.

The successors to the apostles are the pope, bishops, and priests.

Like the apostles, we are sinful and imperfect.

But neither our failures, nor anything else,
can destroy the Church that Christ founded:
“The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.”

Each person must answer for himself or herself the question Jesus poses:
“Who do **you** say that I am?”

The “power of the keys” tells us that we can build our lives on the “rock”
of Peter’s faith—the faith of the Church.

Take a look at that stained-glass window near the front of the church.

A man on one knee, with fishing nets around him, receiving keys from Christ.

The point is clear: Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the Church he founded
upon Peter and the other apostles.

Here, in the Catholic Church, is the fullness of Christ’s Church:
the profession of faith, the holy sacraments, and union with the pope and bishops,
who are the successors of Peter and the other apostles.

The Church is not perfect—far from it.

All of the Church’s members stand in need of repentance and holiness.

That is a reminder of who’s in charge.

The Church is Christ’s work among us.

The keys given to Peter open the Church’s door to eternal life.