

The Authority to Believe

August 24, 2014

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 22.19-23;

Romans 11.33-36;

Matthew 16.1-23

By Rev. Paul Scalia

We all desire to be known by those we love. Love seeks to be reciprocated and in that way shared. Knowing the other and being known is essential to love. Our Lord is no exception. “But who do you say that I am?” he asks his apostles (Mt 16:15). He had at this point been preaching, teaching, and healing for some time. He had just heard with dismay the weak answer to his question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13) The crowds who so eagerly followed him thought he was someone else – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets (cf. Mt 16:14). So he turns to his apostles, his constant companions, his closest friends, and hoping to find some solace in their understanding – that they, at least, knew him – he asks, “But who do you say that I am?”

This question is an appeal not only of a man, but also of God himself – of the Sacred Heart – for someone who knows him. It is an appeal for *faith*. It is therefore a question fraught with doctrinal significance and import. Everything hinges on the answer. Our salvation depends on our response to this cry of his heart. In the exchange that follows, we find not only the right response of faith but also the means by which God enables us to make it.

Simon Peter's Response

Jesus asks the question of *all* the apostles: in effect, *But who do all of you say that I am?* Immediately we see Simon Peter's primacy. He responds on behalf of all. Or, rather, they all find voice through his response: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Mt 16:16). And to Simon Peter, already exercising a certain leadership and authority among the apostles, our Lord grants even more authority.

First, he reveals that an exceptional grace has been granted to Simon Peter: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father” (Mt 16:17). Alone among the apostles Simon Peter is moved by the Father to make this confession of faith. Nor is this the only place in the gospels where we encounter Peter's exceptional role. Peter is the only one our Lord enables to do something more than human. All of Jesus' other miracles simply restore to a person what is proper to human nature: to see, hear, walk, speak, and so on. To Peter alone, however, he gives the power to walk on water (cf. Mt. 14:28-33) and to draw a coin miraculously from a fish's mouth (cf. Mt 17:24-27). And to Peter alone he proceeds to give unparalleled authority.

To demonstrate the granting of such unique authority, our Lord changes Simon's name: "And so I say to you, you are Peter" (Mt 16:17). He intends here something more than a nickname. Whenever God changes a name, it indicates a certain change in the person and an expression of the person's mission. Thus Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel. Simon becomes Peter and thus enters into the noble company of the patriarchs. Something new is happening here.

The parallelism in the two responses also indicates something new being established. Simon states something profoundly true about Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Our Lord in turn states something true about Simon: "And so I say to you, you are Peter" (Mt 16:18). Peter's words are, of course, merely descriptive. But our Lord's are effective. He speaks, and it comes to be. Simon is forever changed.

Stability and Authority

Simon becomes Peter, which means "rock." As the name so is the man, says scripture (cf. 1 Sam 25:25). Peter is indeed the Church's rock: "upon this rock I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). Our Lord has come into the world to establish the Church as his own continuing presence, the sacrament of salvation, the household of God. Finding in Simon the stability of faith, he now confirms him in that faith and makes him the rock, the foundation for that household. In this name we again encounter the exceptional role of Peter. Scripture always refers to the *Lord* as the rock. But now Jesus confers that title on a mere man, Simon son of Jonah. It is yet another indication that our Lord is granting him a unique prerogative. Indeed, he establishes Peter as the strongest of rocks. The Church built on him is indefectible, able to withstand even the assaults of the evil one. "[T]he gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18).

In addition to this stability, our Lord confers authority: "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" (Mt 16:19). Today a municipality might ceremoniously give someone the keys to the city. The symbolism is lost on most of us. Those dwelling in the ancient, walled cities, however, understood the keys as all important. He who had the keys had authority over the city. He held in his hands the health and well-being of all within the city. Our Lord now gives Peter such authority – not to a mere earthly city – but to heaven itself.

This authority, continued in Peter's successors, the popes, is the authority of Christ himself – to teach, rule, and sanctify in his name. By Christ's authority the Church teaches divine truths infallibly, administers the sacraments as unfailing means of grace, and even binds the consciences of her faithful in her governance. Peter, continuing in the office of the pope, gives expression to this authority on behalf of all. As all the apostles found voice through Peter, so the Church finds her voice of faith in the pope. His office serves as the guarantee of the true profession of faith that Peter is the first to make.

To illustrate this authority Mother Church puts before us Eliakim as a type or prefigurement of Peter (cf. Is 22:19-23). Isaiah prophesies that Eliakim will become master of the palace in place of Shebna. "I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. . . . I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open." Peter is a fulfillment of these words. He is invested (literally, "clothed") with our Lord's authority as master of the palace – that is, head of the household of God. We hear that Eliakim "shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah" (Is 22:21). Peter is truly father to those who dwell in the Church. Indeed, the faithful have seen this truth so clearly that they acclaim his successor as "pope" – papa, father, daddy.

Proportionate to Our Needs

Peter did not make his confession of faith on his own or from human instructors (“flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father”). Nor do we. We could not possibly, as the apostle makes clear in his mystical outburst:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given the Lord anything that he may be repaid? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

We do not believe because in our cleverness and intelligence we have figured out the truth about God. Rather, to believe, to respond to our Lord in faith, we rely on the revelation of God through the authority of the Church, through the authority entrusted to Peter and his successors. Such, then, is the purpose of papal authority, the reason our Lord entrusts the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter: so that the faithful can make the confession of faith confidently and joyfully. Because of Peter’s authority, we can believe. Without the authority of the Church, without the papacy to express this authority, we are left grasping to find God.

Approaching the matter another way, we can understand that God establishes this authority as proportionate to our needs. Since we need to give a proper response to Jesus’ question, he has given us a teacher who can speak definitively about him – about who he is and what he has done. Since our intellect is darkened and our wills weakened, we receive an earthly authority that can define true doctrine. Without this authority to shape us, our ability to respond is crippled. Instead of giving Peter’s response of faith we become instead like the crowds who thought our Lord was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.

Likewise, since we are victim to the world’s inconstancy, the Lord gives us an authority “like a peg in a sure spot” (Is 22:25). The indefectibility of the Church serves us in the midst of the world’s changes and upheavals. The world sees nothing sure and certain. In the midst of seemingly constant change and indeed disintegration, the peg in the sure spot is papal authority. *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, say the Carthusians: The Cross stands while the world spins. This nicely describes the Church’s teaching authority as well. The rock of our faith remains while everything else shifts, sways, and pitches. Emperors and kings have come and gone. The papacy endures.

This question and answer session between Jesus and Simon Peter highlights the intersection of two things commonly set at odds: the personal act of faith and doctrinal authority. Our Lord asks a personal question, and the only one that really matters: *Who do you say that I am?* The response that each of us must make cannot help but be doctrinal, and profoundly so. We have no way of responding except by way of a teaching authority that reveals to us what was once revealed to Peter. To that end, our Lord has given us the papacy – Peter – as the rock, the solid and indefectible authority enabling us to believe – to give that response of faith to our Lord’s cry of the heart.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##874-896.

George Joyce, "The Pope," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12260a.htm>

Jeffrey A. Mirus, "The Authority of the Pope," available at:
<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=4319>

Pedro Rodriguez, "The Primacy of the Pope in the Church," available at:
<http://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/PRIMPOPE.HTM>

"St. Peter and the Popes," available at:
<http://users.binary.net/polycarp/popets.html>

Rev. William Saunders, "Did Jesus Really Make Peter Pope?" *Arlington Catholic Herald* (October 20, 1994), available at:
<http://www.catholic-pages.com/pope/peter.asp>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Simon states a profound truth about Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."***
- ***In turn, Jesus establishes Peter as the strongest of rocks, upon which is built a Church able to withstand even the assaults of the evil one.***
- ***In addition to this stability, Jesus confers authority: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven."***
- ***Since our intellect is darkened and our wills weakened, we receive an earthly authority that can define true doctrine.***
- ***Without the authority of the Church, without the papacy to express this authority, we are left grasping to find God.***
- ***Jesus entrusts the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter so that the faithful can make the confession of faith confidently and joyfully.***