

Homily for August 22-23, 2020
21st Sunday Ordinary Time

Two Texts and One Treasure

I love playing tennis. For the past 15 years most weeks my friend Stew and I stand between those lines on that hard surface and get lost in the joy of hitting that yellow ball back and forth. We trust one another to get the calls right. That ball was wide, just off the line or “Wow, great shot Stew, your point.”

Well when tennis is played at the professional level like it will next week at the US Open even minus stars like Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and Bianca Andreescu, the Canadian who won last year, there will be tennis of a different calibre on offer in New York. Part of the difference will be judges, all around the court, watching every line, making sure that ball is in or out, long, or wide. The most import judge in tennis is the chair umpire, who is the official overseeing the match. He is the living voice whose word is authoritative and final.

Without that living voice, the flow of the game would stop and be replaced by bickering. Appeals to the rule book of tennis or to past examples of similar situations would be hopeless, for they would never serve to resolve the present and pressing question. Because of, and not despite, the umpire’s authoritative voice, the play is able to resume and people can focus not on the umpire but on the skilled play of tennis’ best.

Well, just in tennis there are those people who judge the game, there is a parallel in the Church. The universal care of souls entrusted to the Pope has a similar umpiring role. The Holy Father is to facilitate the play and flow of the church’s life: in its teaching, its care for the poor, its liturgy, its art, and so forth. His voice is not meant to shut down that liveliness, just the contrary. It is meant to enhance it and to cause it to resume when it has been interrupted.

So today I want to talk with you about the Papacy. The Catechism, paragraph 937, says the following about the Vicar of Christ’s umpiring role:

The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, "supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls".

How is it that the Church can make this bold claim, entrusting to the Bishop of Rome such a comprehensive and universal care of souls? I want to answer this question by considering two texts and one treasure. The two texts are Isaiah 22 and Matthew 16. I will come to them in a couple of minutes. For now, I want to begin with the one treasure.

The treasure has to do with the relics of St. Peter. After his crucifixion Peter’s body was removed from his cross and buried in a simple earthen grave on the very ground where the current St. Peter’s is built. Fifty years after his death this area became a common burial site, called a necropolis, where tombs, of mostly pagan, and some Christian remains were buried. The burial of St. Peter in the Vatican is confirmed by several early literary sources like this record from Eusebius of Caesarea, the earliest Father of Church History.

“If you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church.”

The trophies he is referring to are the relics of Saints Peter and Paul. From the earliest times pilgrims would come to the Vatican to pay their respects to Peter and to the Ostian way to pay their respects to St. Paul. In 320 a Basilica was erected by Emperor Constantine at the Vatican and stood until the current St. Peter's was built throughout the 16th century and into the early 17th century.

Although it was believed for hundreds of years that the bones of St. Peter were underneath the High Altar of St. Peter's, it was only in 1941 that a graffiti wall was discovered. The discovery of this wall was part of the excavation work begun in 1939 when Pope Pius XII asked for the necropolis to be unearthed. One fragment of this wall had writing on it in Greek that can be translated as “Peter is here” or “Peter in peace”. The stone was removed to reveal behind it a cavity with a purple cloth interwoven with gold thread lying on a shelf. As the cloth was unfurled bones were discovered inside, bones that carbon dating locate as belonging to a man who died somewhere in the 60s of the first century, who was in his late sixties to early seventies. From the time they had been placed there in the 4th century until 1941 the relics had remained hidden. Now discovered, nine fragments of these bones were placed in a silver reliquary and placed inside the Confessio Altar in 1968 by Pope Paul VI. This altar is just below the High Altar in St Peter's.

This treasure is one of the most significant Christian archeological finds of the twentieth century and confirms the importance attached to the Apostle Peter from the earliest centuries.

So, the question is: Why was such attention given to his relics so that a basilica has stood on this place since 320? The answer is simple really. The earliest generations of Christians understood his importance to the Church as the first Pope. A designation and responsibility he had been given by our Lord Jesus Christ. So, let us turn from the one treasure to the two texts to see how this designation was given.

Matthew's Gospel is divided into five main sections that correspond to the Five Books of the Old Testament Law. These divisions mark the five teaching units in the Gospel. This is to show Jesus is the New Moses and the Church the new Temple.

Matthew 16-18 is a unit that concentrates on the Church and twice in this section the word Church is used by Jesus, here in chapter 16 and again in chapter 18. This is the only place in the Gospels where the word Church is used. This is significant because it makes clear that in teaching on the Church the role of Peter is central to the Church's foundation. The key verses are the ones recording Peter's response to Jesus' question:

Who do you say that I am?

You will notice Peter gives to Jesus the title, “Christ” which defines his office as the long-awaited Messiah who will build the Church. He then addresses Simon with the title Peter, thus describing his office as the rock on which the Church will be built.

You will notice as well that Jesus gives not only an office to Peter but the keys as the sign of this office. This is where Isaiah 22:15–25, part of which we read today. Here there is one like a prime minister, whose serves the king. This office is handed on to a successor by the symbolic act of handing on the “key of the household of King Hezekiah. There had been a corrupt Prime Minister who was thrust from his office and the governance given to Eliakim. The corrupt leader Shebna is being addressed and told that to Shebna

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. 23 I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his ancestral house.

In Matthew, Jesus is the new Davidic king, who appoints Peter the prime minister over the kingdom of heaven as his vicar, representative on earth. As in Isaiah 22, Peter’s position is designed for him and his successors; the office is meant to endure as long as the kingdom itself. Entrusted with the keys, Peter wields Christ’s own royal authority, as did Eliakim in the household of King Hezekiah, the reigning king at the time of Isaiah’s writing here in chapter 22.

This understanding of the office of Peter as presented here in Matthew and foreshadowed in Isaiah is why the Church states the pope:

enjoys by divine institution supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls.

Both the treasure and the texts validate this for us. The papacy is a gift that is the oldest and most enduring institution in the world. No wonder. We have Jesus word that nothing in this world or the nether world can destroy it.