

Homily for February 22nd, 2019.

The Feast of the Chair of St. Peter.

The Cathedral Church of Rome is the Church of St. John Lateran. For me the feature that is most striking about this ancient Church is the Cathedra. This is the Chair that the Bishop of Rome occupies when he is present in His Cathedral. As you can see from the photograph this is one extraordinary chair. What most impresses me about it is its solitary beauty and simplicity. It represents the teaching office and authority of the Successor of Peter because the Bishop of Rome is also the Pope.

This is the only day of the Liturgical Year when we celebrate an object other than a Church. There are two days when we mark key buildings within the life of the Church, like St. Mary Major on August 5 and St John Lateran on November 9th, both in Rome.

But why a Feast Day for the Chair of St. Peter..... that is, this chair?

Well, it is because what the chair represents. In today's Gospel when Jesus asks the Apostles who they say Jesus is, Simon responds, "you are the Christ", that is the Messiah of God. It is because Peter saw rightly who Jesus was, even though he didn't yet rightly understand the nature of His Messiahship that Jesus declared, you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church.

Simon was given the name Peter, because as the one who would have primacy within the Church, Jesus desired for Peter and the 265 people who would succeed him, so that today Francis is our 266th Pope, to teach authoritatively the fullness of what it means to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God.

The significance of the Chair helps us to understand that within the Body of Christ there is someone who is in charge and has been entrusted with continually guiding and governing the universal Church. Within each Diocese this governance is entrusted to the Bishop, who like the Bishop of Rome has his own Cathedra in His Cathedral Church.

What a gift it is as Catholics to have someone who is in the driver's seat, so to speak guiding and governing the Church. When we were in the Holy Land, we were in this 60 seater bus. And let me tell you we had an amazing driver, Mohammed, in that most important seat of all. I was sitting right at the front of the bus and was so impressed by his calm and poised way of driving through the narrow and busy streets of Jerusalem and through the windy and hilly roads of Bethlehem.

Similarly the Pope and Bishops as successors to the Apostles are to steer the Church through the challenging streets of this world. They too are to exercise the calm and skillful poise like Mohammed on those Holy Land roads. Peter's describes what kind of driver's the Pope and Bishops are to be in the first reading. Those who are driving the Catholic Bus are witnesses to Christ's suffering – such a big part of our experience in the present world – but also sharers in the future glory. Jesus is to be the focus by which the Pope and Bishops direct us on life's journey. And their demeanor and attitude is to be one of gentle and tender care.

I exhort the elders among you ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

The words, tend, oversight, willingly and exemplifying Christ like love are the words that stand out. These are all expressions of reliable stability that is truly loving. There is to be no hint of using people for personal gain nor using intimidation and coercion in how they are to relate to the beloved people of God.

But of course it is not just the Holy Father and Bishops who are entrusted with the driver's seat. I was installed in this chair to be your pastor. I am inspired by the skill of Mohammed in how he maneuvered our pilgrimage bus and pray for the grace to serve you and the Bishop well from this chair as we discover more fully what it means to share in the Lord's suffering and glory as we know Him who is the Messiah of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.