

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Two prominent features of the Catholic Church find foundation in today's gospel: leadership entrusted to the pope and forgiveness entrusted to priests.

The passage opens simply enough when Jesus asks his disciples an almost gossipy question. They were proclaiming his message and healing the sick. He knew people were talking about him. He was an influencer. So he asked, "What do you hear out there? Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

We presume the disciples told him the truth without curating their replies toward what they thought he wanted to hear. All the examples they submitted were admirable figures: John the Baptist, (Jesus' favorite,) and then Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet. No one reported people compared him to less desirable individuals like Herod, Pharaoh, or Goliath. But even the positive responses were not enough. Jesus was looking for something more.

He got it in Peter's reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." With that, Jesus immediately concluded several things about Peter: He did not figure it out on his own. The Father revealed it to him. Peter reported it correctly. On this evidence Jesus declared Peter a rock, something hard to square with other episodes in Peter's life, not least his later threefold denial of Christ. But he was the rock upon which Jesus built his church. When Catholics hear this, we believe it to mean the Church has stood firm on the foundation of Peter and his successors, whom we call the popes. Strong evidence suggests that Peter traveled to Rome, where the gospel could gain a wider impact, and that he was martyred there. St. Peter's Basilica stands atop his remains.

Jesus also handed Peter the metaphorical keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever he bound on earth was to be bound in heaven; whatever he loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. John's gospel records a similar conversation, where Jesus said to Peter, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven." Since Jesus handed this power to Peter, Catholics believe it remains in the church especially through the sacrament of reconciliation. When people ask, why do Catholics confess their sins to priests, we report what Jesus said: "Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." He entrusted forgiveness to human ministers.

Today you could tweak Jesus' question this way: "Who do people say the pope is? Who do people say your priest is?" Not all popes have been role models. Not all priests are compassionate. People may compare us to less desirable figures. Like Peter, we have failures too. Still, Jesus chose Peter based on other evidence: The Father revealed a great mystery to him, and Peter listened. We try to do that too.

At times any of us may feel inadequate to our responsibilities at home, at work, at school, or even knowing what to say to friends. But the Father reveals enough of the mystery to help us along the way. We are well aware of our weaknesses, but God is well aware of our strengths. In one passage, Jesus introduced his disciples to principles of leadership and forgiveness. We have the capability to make mistakes, but that doesn't mean we have no capability to lead. Sometimes the Father invites us forward with what little we have. And if we sin, forgiveness is within reach.