

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Church: A Mystery Rooted in Love and Devotion to Jesus Christ

Isaiah 22:19-23; Psalm 138:1-2,2-3,6,8; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Did you know that one of the earliest and most thoughtful descriptions of Christians comes from Aristides, a second-century pagan philosopher?

Aristedes reported to Emperor Hadrian, "Christians show love for one another; they always help widows; they rescue orphans from those who would harm them; if a man has anything, he gives it freely to anyone who has nothing; when they come across a stranger, they take him home as if he were their real brother; and if they hear that one of them is in prison or being persecuted for sticking to the name of their Redeemer, all of them provide him with what he needs. These people are indeed a new sort of human being; there is something divine about them."

There is something divine in each of us. This reminds us of our identity as baptized Christians, a gift from our Lord Jesus Christ. His words to Peter teach us about the Church and invite us to reflect on our role within it. Jesus says to Peter, "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" (Matt. 16:18).

Jesus founded the Church and chose Peter as its foundation. From a human perspective, this might seem risky because Peter had abandoned and denied Jesus three times (cf. Lk. 22:54-62). Yet Jesus still chose Peter as the rock and pillar of his Church.

This shows that God did not choose perfect people to build his Church. He chose people who had experienced his love and forgiveness, even if they had made mistakes. What mattered was not who Peter was at first but how he changed through the grace Jesus gave him. God always offers hope for a new life filled with love. He made Peter a witness to the power of his love and forgiveness.

Jesus not only made Peter the rock of his Church but also promised that the gates of the netherworld would not overcome it. He gave Peter the keys of binding and loosing—to prohibit (bind) and permit (loose)—the authority over the Church (cf. Matt. 16:19). We trust in the enduring strength of the Church Christ founded, which continues today in the Roman Catholic Church. Its roots trace back to St. Peter, the first Pope and Vicar of Christ, followed by Linus, Cletus, Clemens, Evaristus, and now Pope Leo XIV. This Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. We confess one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, affirming the unity of the Triune God. The members are not perfect, but the Risen Lord supports and guides the Church through the Holy Spirit. The Church is present around the world, sharing the same faith and built on the foundation of the Apostles.

It is important to remember that when Jesus established his Church, he asked Peter and the other Apostles to make a personal choice: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). This question lies at the heart of our faith and invites each of us to reflect on our own answer.

I think that if Jesus were here with us today and asked, "Who do people say that I am?" many of us might reach for our phones to ask AI or search on Google, Facebook, or other sites. In seconds, we would have many answers. But Jesus would likely take our phones away and say, "No, I'm not asking what AI says. I'm asking you: Who do you say I am?" Jesus is not looking for information. He wants a relationship, a choice, and our lives. These are things AI, Google, or Facebook cannot provide.

Like Peter, we hope to say for ourselves, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mat. 16:16). Confessing Jesus as Christ is not just about words; it is a way of life. It means being honest when it is rare, showing compassion when others do not, choosing forgiveness over revenge, standing up for truth, caring for the poor, following Jesus' example, and having the courage to say, "I am a Christian," even when friends say,

"Come on, everyone is doing it." Our faith is often tested not when it is easy to follow Jesus, but when it is hard. Yet Jesus promises us his grace, so we are not alone. He is with us and builds us up through the Holy Spirit. Notice what he says to Peter: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church." He does not say, "Peter, you will build my Church," but instead, "I will build my Church."

Together with St. Peter, Pope Leo XIV, and bishops, clergy, and religious around the world, we are the building blocks of the Church. Peter is the foundation, and we are the stones that form this spiritual home. Jesus, the head of the Church, wants to work through each of us, as he did with Peter and the Apostles. We are called to consider how God works through us to strengthen his Church. Even if we feel small, Jesus can do great things through us, as we see in the life of our patron, St. Therese of the Child Jesus. Our mission is to find our place in the Church and to use the gifts God has given us.

Being Catholic is more than a label. It is an invitation to deepen our faith, love, and devotion to Jesus Christ. Through him, in him, and with him, the divine spark within us grows.

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Pastor