

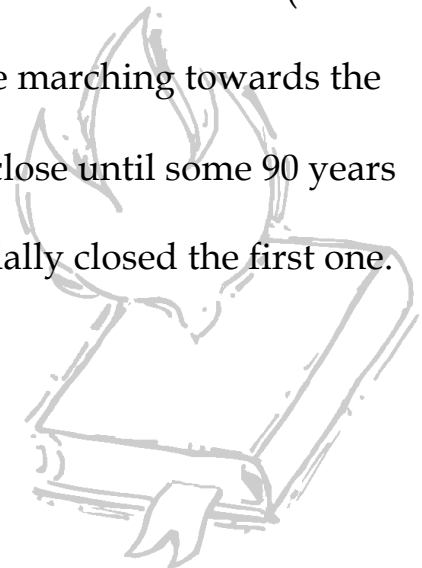
Homily

21st Sunday OT - A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
August 26-27, 2023

Is 22: 15, 19-23
Ps 138: 1-2, 2-3, 6, 8
Rm 11: 33-36
Mt 16: 13-20

When reflecting on today's gospel, my thoughts went back almost a century to the year 1929 and the papacy of Pope Pius XI (1922-1939). According to history, Vatican City was not only the "home base" of Roman Catholicism but also was a place of so much turmoil, of so much destruction and so much violence because of the history of mankind. For seventy years, the popes of the 14th Century were forced to leave Vatican City because of oncoming barbarians. We know in history how, some eight hundred years earlier, Pope Leo the Great (440-461) was forced to protect his unprotected land with no army against the armies of Attila and his Huns in 452 AD. We know that the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) prematurely ended because invaders were marching towards the Vatican; that particular council was not able to close until some 90 years later at Vatican II when the second council officially closed the first one.

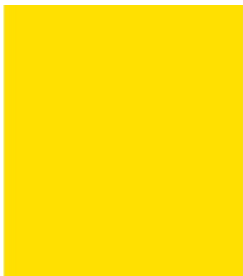


I was thinking about the year 1929 when Pope Pius XI was trying to preserve the church while Benito Mussolini took control of Italy. Where Pius XI once respected and honored the self-proclaimed “Il Duce” (= leader or dictator), the exasperated pope realized the true intent of Mussolini was to impose his will over Italy instead of serving his people with love. As history tells us, eventually Mussolini joined the Axis Powers for the purpose of conquering Europe and the world.

As we learn in history, during every age one can find a type of dictator or oppressor who will marginalize and shut down anyone else to push their own radical agenda. In the case of the Catholic Church of the 1920s, Pius XI was in trouble because he knew that Mussolini coveted all the papal lands that the church owned.

As a way to save the Church against the onslaught of this dictator, Pius XI made a deal with Mussolini called the Lateran Treaty of 1929. According to the terms of this treaty, Pius XI handed Mussolini most of the lands in Italy that the church once possessed; in return, Mussolini would allow the Church to keep three major basilicas in Rome (St. Mary Major, St. John Lateran and St. Paul Outside the Walls) in addition to the

120 acres that encircled St. Peters Basilica. Pope Pius XI then made a deal with Mussolini that those one hundred twenty acres surrounding St. Peter's basilica would be designated its own private country, separate from Italy, which formed the smallest country in the world, Vatican City State.



As a result, Pius XI created a flag that would establish that particular country with the image of two keys that were placed on a sea of gold and white, the gold representing God and the white representing us. In addition, the handles of the keys would face downward, which would allow the leader of the Church to have access to those keys, paralleling the story we just read in today's gospel.

When Jesus handed those keys of the kingdom to Peter in Matthew 16: 18, those metaphorical keys to heaven were passed on to the first leader of the Church to represent Christ after his death, namely St. Peter, the first pope of the church. In saying this, we do not that St. Peter is God. We are not saying that St. Peter is infallible in all the things he said and did; right after this pericope we read today from Matthew, Jesus

subsequently rebukes Peter for his patronizing attitude, just as St. Paul did to St. Peter in Galatians 2, claiming that Peter turned his back on the Gentiles when they needed God's help.

St. Peter may have had his issues but our Lord still presented these metaphorical keys to Peter as an access heaven. If we follow God's will and when we live the Christian life, the responsibility of the pope is to hold onto those keys and allow access to the heavenly doors to those who live that Christian life.

Throughout the history of the Church, we have been instructed that some popes have done some very good things and others have not. The Catholic Church is perfect but their leaders are certainly not! This is the way of the popes and this is the way of the world. In every age, we have our ups and we have our downs, our good popes and bad popes, but we are not here to worship any of these popes. We pray that popes hold the keys they have been given worthily but, in reality, we come to Church because we know how passed on those keys to the kingdom, namely Jesus Christ.

The beauty of that Vatican flag is that it is a symbol of what God has offered us, that God has given those who live the Christian life access to the doors to heaven. If we understand that, then those keys and this Mass because the source and summit, the beginning and the end of everything we do. If we understand the importance of this Mass and the importance of those keys, we really should not take this for granted as we often do, because some people lament that the Mass is just the same thing every week.

If we look at the Church as boring or more of the same time in and time out, then we venture out into the world of temptation and attachments that lead us to a road to ruin. If we look at the Church as the most beautiful gift and the Mass as the most beautiful meal, then we gaze upon its beauty for the rest of our existence, if we truly believe in what the Church and this liturgy truly mean to us.

If we think the Mass is boring, then we probably will be bored on our way to hell. If we see the Mass as the source and summit of our lives, of God's gift to the world and God's face in our presence, then falling in love with God in the Eucharist will be all we do for the rest of our

existence on the other side of life. For that reason, I continue to celebrate these Masses both online and in church, because this is the one gift I can offer that is not mine but God's, the one thing I can do to open the door on the way to salvation.

In this sense, I will continue to show all of you that we care for you in this particular way, to allow God to work through me to offer this particular grace to you. Please know I will try to be persistent in sharing God's grace; I ask you to be diligent in receiving it and giving thanks to it. We have been given so many, signs, symbols and rituals to encounter the presence of God, including that Vatican Flag. We have been given the Real Presence of God to adore his body and blood.

In order for us to get to heaven, we need God to direct us towards the doors to heaven, to which the pope has been given the keys to open it for us; the priests have been given the grace and authority to forgive sins in God's name and to share this sacrament with God's love.

In return, let us show God that we care in what has been given to us, to show God that we are serious in maintaining the church, not just in

our buildings, but in our hearts and in our lives, and let's take that love and share it with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.