

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – August 23, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 825 words

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”, our Lord asks his disciples. And they cannot agree on an answer; only Simon Peter has the correct one, aided by none other than God the Father. But this has been the case down through history: left to ourselves, we are prone to error – about the things of this life and the things of the next. Our minds are finite, limited; moreover, our passions can influence our thought or even dominate it. Then there is the influence of others, of the crowd. And while we have both the capacity for the truth and the desire to possess it, yet there are some truths that are beyond our natural grasp.

Yes, such are the truths that we can only know through divine revelation. They include an array of things, like the Most Holy Trinity, the Hypostatic Union (that is, the union of Christ’s humanity and divinity), the existence of angels, and the fact that, at every Mass, bread and wine are truly transformed into the Body and Blood of our Savior. Without divine revelation, we could, at most, speculate about such things. With divine revelation, however, we can know about them most certainly. But then, we study history and see how so many have, in fact, disagreed about these things, in spite of the revelation God has given. The fact of his revelation is not enough.

For example, in the fourth century, a heresiarch named Arius (a priest) led a great many astray, claiming that the Son was not “consubstantial with the Father”, as we profess in the Creed each week; claiming, rather, that Christ was only like God and was in fact inferior to the Father. In the eleventh century, an archdeacon in France named Berengar caused a considerable uproar by denying the doctrine of transubstantiation. And then, just a few centuries later, there was the devastating calamity of the so-called Protestant Reformation, with the result of millions denying the truth of Christ’s one Church and splintering into so many groups, that are still with us today.

No, the fact of divine revelation was insufficient in these cases and many others, for people were still able to disagree over its meaning. Words are hard to pin down; language evolves and has considerable nuance. It is subject to interpretation, and that can be affected by many factors, from one’s personal biases to prevailing mindsets. A higher authority is needed to arrive at the definitive interpretation. After all, wouldn’t it be cruel of God to reveal his truth but not give us a way to know it with firm certainty? And so our Lord said to Simon, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church” – and he spoke to him of binding and loosing.

The papacy is that authority established by Christ to guide us surely along the path of salvation within his one Church. The pope’s lofty role is to be the visible manifestation of the invisible Christ – that is, the visible representative of the Church’s invisible head. That is why we call him the “Vicar of Christ” – “vicar”, meaning “representative”. And by his teaching and example, the Holy Father is to give us the true sense of God’s revelation – what the Lord left for us in what we call the “deposit of faith” – shielding us from erroneous interpretations or other excesses. History amply bears out why this role in God’s household of faith is most necessary.

I think of so many times when popes indicated the true sense of God’s revelation against prevailing errors. To name just a few examples: The Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century, upon hearing Pope Leo the Great’s teaching on the Hypostatic Union, arose and exclaimed, “Peter has spoken through Leo!” Theologians in the middle ages were not in agreement about the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but Pope Pius IX settled the matter for good in 1854 with a dogmatic definition. And more recently, in the heat of the sexual revolution and the societal rejection of traditional mores, Pope Paul VI reiterated God’s unchanging teaching on human life and family planning.

In every age the Vicars of Christ have guided us surely and put a spotlight on the true sense of God’s revelation. Yes, many sadly reject that authoritative guidance and go their own way; the

Lord always respects our freedom. But where would we be without the papacy? The ancient world gives us an indication: in so many major cities, there was a “pantheon” – a temple that was set up where all the gods and religions could co-exist, for people could not agree on which was the true one. Oh, but in Rome, the Pantheon was converted into a Christian basilica! Thank you, Lord, for my Catholic faith! Keep me safe in your holy Church, under the guidance of Peter and his successors, until my dying breath. Amen.