

## Sunday 21

If you have been to Rome and to St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, you will remember that this passage from Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus identifies Peter as the rock on which he will build his church is engraved above the high altar. The present St. Peter's Basilica was built when the Protestant Reformation took place. Indeed, some of the money which a monk in Germany was collecting by selling people indulgences was going to be used to finance the building of the new St. Peter's. And it was this collection which set Martin Luther off since he believed that this monk was teaching the faithful that they could buy a way into heaven for their beloved dead. So began Luther's revolt against the Church. It led him to deny the special place which Rome and its bishop, the pope, had in the universal church. And so when the new basilica was built, in reaction to Luther, scriptural texts which emphasized Peter's special place in the church's structure--and therefore that of his successors, the popes--were engraved upon its walls.

This year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's break with the Catholic Church. Today, our church and the Lutheran churches are in friendly dialogue. Indeed the pope and the head bishop of the

Lutheran Federation signed a document in Sweden this year promising further efforts to overcome the separation which took place 500 years ago. We can now tread a common path towards reconciliation, Pope Francis told those gathered there. And prior to that agreement, indeed for the last fifty years, Catholic and Lutheran theologians have reached agreement on the main point of Luther's thought, that we are saved by grace and not by our good works.

But what is written in gold letters on the walls of St. Peter's remains there for all to see: "You are Peter...." And Peter, in Catholic thinking, can have a successor, at least in some sense, and that successor is the pope. And this basic position of Catholic theology is clearly present in the popular consciousness, for when people, Catholic or non-Catholic, think of the Catholic Church, they think of one man, the pope. That does not happen with Protestant churches. The Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches have lead bishops, but their churches are not identified with them to the same extent as the Roman Catholic Church is identified with the bishop of Rome, the pope. However, that difference can be explained in part by the fact that these churches are covered less by the Western press.

Traditionally Protestant theologians interpreted this text as meaning that the church is built not on Peter as a person but on his faith. So faith is the basis of the Church, not the man Peter. Catholic theology, on the other hand, said: No, it is Peter. Yes, his faith, but it is his faith. To me the Catholic position sounds better. Oh, yes, if Peter had no faith and if a pope ceased to be a believer, then their faith could not be the basis, the foundation, of the Church. That is true. On the other hand, faith is an abstraction. It becomes a reality only in a person. When Jesus spoke these words, he was looking at one person, Peter, but Peter who had just made an act of faith in him as the Christ, as the Son of God.

The rest of this text is focused on the keys. The Lord says to Peter: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven." Their's powerful words. Who believes them today? Even among Catholics! We live in a democracy. People have to give reasons to defend their positions. If their reasons are not persuasive, we reject their positions. And we do the same thing, I suspect, in the church. Is that ok? I think it is in 99 out of 100 cases. For it is only in that one case that the pope or the bishops will assert their ultimate claim, that what they are saying can really open or close the entrance to the Kingdom of God. And that one case will have to involve the two great commandments of the law: the love of God

and of neighbor, for the Lord Jesus has taught us that these two are the sum and substance of the Law and the prophets. Therefore, it is only when it is absolutely clear that a certain action goes against these two commandments that the pope and the bishops can say: whoever does that is closing himself or herself off from the Kingdom of God.

It bothers me when politicians present themselves as Catholic and yet feel free to disagree publicly with the pope and the bishops. For instance, the pope has questioned the right of people to call themselves Christians if they believe that walls should be built to keep people out of a neighboring nation. But many a politician in our country who claims to be Catholic simply disregards the pope's statement. And yet no one, I suspect, not even the pope himself, would claim that this particular case of disregard of the pope's position, in itself alone, will prevent these people from entering the Kingdom of God. We would have to know more about the entire lives of these people. And yet their position on this particular issue could be the key to their overall position in life. And if that overall position is in direct contradiction to the two great commandments, then we have to say that it is preventing these people from entering the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray for Pope Francis, that he may use well the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven entrusted to him as Peter in the Church. Let us pray for our bishops throughout the world and in our own country, that they may be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in using the keys entrusted to them. Finally, let us pray for ourselves as the Church, for it is to us as one body, as the Church, that the power of God and the Lord Jesus has been given, a power which the gates of hell cannot prevail against.