



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

The rock that doesn't roll

Readings: Isaiah 22:19-23, Ps 137, Romans 11: 33-36, Matthew 16:13-20

The great text of the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi comes up in the common round of the lection and on feast days so that I was reckoning that I must have preached on it at least seventy or eighty times over the years, probably more. So, you will be cheerfully reflecting, he is about to admit there is nothing new to say – and sit down. Actually there has never been anything new to say, the Scripture and the Fathers have said it all a long time ago, but that does not diminish our duty to rehearse the truth. Actually there is so much to say that a long course of winter evenings would scarce begin to cover it. So, briefly, as today's text concerns us as missionaries to the world.....

The text of Peter's Confession and Jesus' appointment of him as the Rock on which He would build the Church is one of the fundamental texts of Church Order, Governance and Unity and the foundation stone of the Papacy. For most of our contemporaries, non-Catholic or non-believer, the Papacy is a problem they cannot get their minds around. Yes, there is a current secular fan club for the person of the present pope but that was true of several of his predecessors and that did not cash out in conversion or Mass attendance.

What are the perceived 'problems' with the Papacy?

First of all, it is not a democracy. Modern people tend to look askance at undemocratic institutions and often with good reason. They assume, being human, that the alternative is totalitarianism. But God is not a democrat. He is Lord. Jesus is not a republican. He is King of Kings. God is a god of justice, love and peace, of mercy and salvation. The Holy Father is His servant and the servant of His people. He is not there to dictate but to serve and hand on the tradition and teaching of Christ. This is not about politics but about salvation. What is eternally true cannot be decided by lobby group on the 'Twittersphere'. The Pope is not at liberty to change the teaching of the Faith. He is there to guard it, hand it on and strengthen the family of Faith.

Human beings, as sinners, need a democratic politic in order to counterbalance our worst natures but we should not assume that we always get it right. Trained child killers have been murdering the unborn in this country for half a century with a full democratic mandate.

Second problem: What about 'bad popes'.

It's pointless Catholics trying to deny there have been bad popes. There have been some 'stinkeroos' – but not many. While TV concentrates on the Borgias (a sort of Papal Eastenders), the truth is that the bad ones were a tiny minority hugely outweighed by the saints, martyrs and giants of the Faith who have occupied the throne of Peter. Indeed you would have to go back a couple of centuries to find a mediocre pope. We have been hugely blessed. But what about the bad ones? They are living proof of the miracle of the Papacy! Because even the worst pope never tried to change the

teaching of the Faith. Today many of the non-catholic sects change the teaching to fit in with the practices of their members ('If enough of us do it, it can't be a sin' – the democratic principle) but, in the Papacy, the Catholic Church has a sheet anchor against such terminal drift and shipwreck. The worst popes are the best witness to the security of the Faith. The best popes are the best witness of how that Faith can transform the world.

The third problem is 'Infallibility'. How can the Pope never be wrong? Let's be clear. He can. If he says today is Tuesday it doesn't make it so. The Pope is not impeccable either. He is a sinner like the rest of us. Pope Saint John-Paul II went to confession twice a week.

Papal infallibility is a teaching of the Catholic Church which states that, in virtue of the promise of Jesus to Peter, the Pope is preserved from the possibility of error when, exercising his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church. Infallibility pertains to when the Holy Father speaks *ex cathedra* to define doctrine. This particular charism has been exercised only twice in the last two centuries - for the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

What people need to know is that there is a coherent and consistent body of teaching and sacramental life that stretches back to Christ's earthly ministry and the Apostolic witness. This has always been proclaimed and guarded by the See of Peter and the bishops of the Universal Church. Its essentials are contained in two books, the Bible and the Catechism. One is the inerrant Word of God given to Man under the inspiration of the Holy

Spirit. The other is the Holy Spirit inspired Church's understanding of God's Word and interpretation for His people. All this operates under the Magisterium, the teaching authority, of Peter.

Without the office of Peter there is no sign of unity, no agreed Faith, no guaranteed teaching authority, no guarantee of the sacraments, no family gathering round the common table, no communion with the saints – just a legion of quarrelling voices. Without Peter there is no Church. He is Jesus' gift to us. He is the rock that doesn't roll.

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