

21st Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's Gospel provides an opportunity for us to reflect on the importance of the institution of the papacy to Catholic Christians.

The purpose of our life is to be in communion with God. We are all called to this communion and we can all help each other. Our best help comes from the saints in our midst – those who love with Jesus' love. But Jesus has also given us many institutional helps, including the special help given us by those who are graced to be bishops.

The local church community is a family into which we have been baptised. We belong to each other. The symbolic centre of this unity is the bishop who is given a special grace to govern the local church. You may know that the word govern comes from 'guberna', the Latin word for a tiller. We are all responsible for pulling on the oars, but the one holding the tiller is responsible for ensuring that our combined efforts are pointing us towards our destination.

Now it was Jesus' dream that every single human being would come to know his Father, and that the whole world would learn to love as he loved. We are not meant to identify only with the local Christian community. The Church is meant to be universal – that is to say 'Catholic', and it is here that the Pope, the bishop of Rome, has an especially graced role. As the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church says: 'The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful'(LG n.23).

Christianity first spread within the Roman Empire. The political importance of Rome, but above all the heroic example of the Roman community in the persecutions, including the martyrdom of both Peter and Paul, led other communities to look to the Roman Church for help when there was danger of different views breaking the unity of the Christian world.

Today's Gospel shows us how Matthew's community understood Peter's role. This is reinforced by the whole of the New Testament. As he faced death, Jesus asked Peter to strengthen the other apostles and the community of believers (Luke 22:31-32). This request was made while Jesus was warning Peter that he was going to deny him three times. In May 1995, Pope John-Paul II wrote an encyclical entitled 'That they may be one'. In it he stated: 'Peter's special ministry in the Church derives completely from grace ... How can we fail to see that the mercy which Peter needs to carry out his ministry is the very mercy which he is the first to experience?'(n.91)

The Pope makes the same point in regard to Paul (n.92). Paul's ministry, like that of Peter, is not dependent on Paul's personal strength but on God's grace. He quotes Paul's words to the Corinthians in which Paul shares with them Jesus' assurance to him: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'. This enables Paul to say: 'When I am weak, then I am strong'(2Corinthians 12:9-10).

Jesus promised to be with his Church till the end of time. He prayed to his Father that his followers would remain united, and it is this promise and this prayer that sustained Peter in his

difficult ministry. When Peter died his successors in the church of Rome continued Peter's role of holding all the various local churches together in one family. Like Peter, other popes have denied Jesus and have been responsible for very un-Christlike behaviour. We have also been blessed with men of extraordinary courage and sanctity. Jesus promised that his Spirit would never abandon us. We pray that the Pope, whoever he might be, will be faithful to the grace given him in his important office of guiding us so that we may grow together in holiness.

No one would question this had it not been for the conflict between the Eastern and Western Churches in the 11th Century and the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century. All Christians would still see the Pope the way he was seen for the first thousand years of the Church's history (n.95). Even with the tragic divisions in Christianity there are still over 1,000 million Catholics in the world who profess to be in communion with the Pope.

Pope John-Paul II states: 'It is the conviction of the Catholic Church that it has preserved in the ministry of the bishop of Rome the visible sign and guarantor of unity. As I acknowledged on my visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva in 1984, this conviction constitutes a difficulty for most other Christians, whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections. To the extent that we are responsible for these hurts I join my predecessor Paul VI in asking forgiveness'(n.88).

After reminding us of the personal weakness of Peter and Paul, the Pope states: 'As the heir to the mission of Peter in the Church, which has been made fruitful by the blood of Peter and Paul and the early martyrs of Rome, the Bishop of Rome exercises a ministry that has its origin in the mercy of God. This mercy converts hearts and pours forth the power of grace where the disciple experiences the bitter taste of his or her personal weakness and helplessness. The authority and power that belong to this ministry are completely at the service of God's merciful plan and must be seen in this perspective. Associating himself with Peter's threefold profession of love, which corresponds to the earlier threefold denial, Peter's Successor knows that he must be a sign of mercy. His is a ministry of mercy, born of an act of Christ's own mercy. This whole lesson of the Gospel must be constantly read anew, so that the exercise of Peter's ministry may lose nothing of its authenticity and transparency. The Church of God is called by Christ to manifest to a world ensnared by its sins and evil designs that, despite everything, God in his mercy can convert hearts to unity and enable them to enter into communion with him'(n.92-93).

The Pope goes on to say: 'The mission of the Bishop of Rome within the College of all the Pastors consists precisely in 'keeping watch, like a sentinel, so that, through the efforts of the pastors, the true voice of Christ the Shepherd may be heard in all the particular Churches. In this way, in each of the particular Churches entrusted to those pastors, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is made present. In this way all the Churches are in full and visible communion, because all the pastors are in communion with Peter and therefore united in Christ'(n.94).

In recognising the special responsibility the Pope has to work for unity among Christians, Pope John-Paul II recognises that his ministry must be exercised in ways that are appropriate to today's circumstances. He says: 'I am convinced that I have a special responsibility to acknowledge the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and to heed the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation'(n.95).

He asks for help from all the Churches 'that we may seek, together of course, the forms in which the ministry of the Papacy may accomplish a service of love recognised by all'(n.95). He quotes with approval the words of Pope Paul VI lamenting the divisions within Christianity as being a serious obstacle to the mission of Christ and repeats a prayer which Pope Paul VI shared with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul: 'May the Holy Spirit guide us along the way of reconciliation, so that the unity of our Churches may become an ever more radiant sign of hope and consolation for all humankind'(n.99).

While we recognise the human weakness of individual Popes, let us remember the enormity of the ministry that the Pope has to carry. Let us support him by our prayers. While we must remain free to disagree with a Pope when he is wrong, let us never forget the special grace with which Jesus supports him. His ministry is to hold the whole of the Catholic world together. If that is truly a value, surely we can afford a little patience when Rome seems to be moving too slowly. Let us pay him the respect of our humble obedience as he guides us in our teaching, our governing and the loving that makes us holy.