

**“And on this rock I will build my Church.”**

***Mt 16:18***

We Catholics know that Christ built His Church upon the rock that is St Peter. This Prince of the Apostles was made to be the first Pope, and was given an authority second to that of Christ Himself. His task was to *teach, sanctify, and govern* the people whom God placed in his care, the sheep of His flock. And these three tasks together make up the role of the Pope today, and of the Church as a whole.

The Pope is commanded to *teach* the Catholic faith in all its fulness, proclaiming it to all nations, fearless in the face of opposition, and clear and unambiguous amidst the ideological confusions of the world. The Pope must preserve all the teachings of the Church down the ages. He has not the authority to adjust them to suit the modern age; he cannot modify the Church’s dogmas; he cannot trim them to fit with the expectations of twenty-first century Catholics, and still less of other Christian denominations or non-Christian religions. Like St Paul, each Pope must say, ‘For I delivered unto you first of all, [that] which I also received’ (1 Cor 15:3 and 11:23).

Second, the Pope is commanded to *sanctify* God’s people with the grace of the Sacraments. The Pope is responsible for helping to shape the liturgy by which we Catholics worship Almighty God, but again he cannot modify these acts of worship according to the winds of change of an unstable world, nor can he alter the manner in which the Sacraments are administered for fear of changing the message that the words and gestures themselves contain. Rather, the role of the Pope and of the Church is to pass on to God’s people a participation in the life of God (1 Pet 1:4) – which we call sanctifying grace and which was forfeited through sin – by forgiving that sin in

the Sacraments of Baptism and Confession, and by strengthening that new life of God through Holy Communion and Confirmation. In this way, sinners are called to conversion. Meanwhile, we who are already regular members of the Church are called to an ever deeper conversion by renouncing habitual sins and following in the footsteps of Christ more closely. And we do this by taking up our own cross of suffering each day, denying ourselves, and imitating Him who is our Redeemer. The Church sanctifies us also through the Sacraments of Holy Matrimony by which husband and wife are given the grace to bring new life into the world, and bear fruit in the lives of their children; and in Holy Orders by which, in the family of the parish, the priest does something remarkably similar in the spiritual order to what parents do in the natural order. And finally in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick – or Extreme Unction – souls are sanctified and strengthened to face the final journey from this life to the next.

And, third, the Pope is commanded to *govern* God's holy people, ordering their lives towards heaven. By establishing dioceses and parishes, by setting up and spreading the religious orders around the world, by structuring the institution of the Church to ensure the Catholic Faith is taught in its fulness and God's grace is made available to all who would avail themselves of it, the Pope has the responsibility to establish here below the Kingdom of God that is the reflection of the Kingdom of heaven above. Nor is the Kingdom of God on earth a democracy, brought about through dialogue or synodal consultation. Rather, it is established as a hierarchy so that what flows from God above may be poured into the lives of God's people here below.

On today's feast of the two great Apostles of Rome, Ss Peter and Paul, we are reminded of these tasks placed upon the shoulders of each and every pope as he

follows in the footsteps of St Peter, and of each and every bishop as he follows in the footsteps of that great missionary, St Paul.

And we are reminded of just some of the treasures of God that come to us through the Church, not least of all the Blessed Sacrament. We would not have the Mass or the Holy Eucharist at all if the Church did not give us priests. And we would not even know about the Blessed Sacrament if the Church had not taught us about Christ's presence in our tabernacles. After all, many Christians believe that Christ's presence in the Eucharist is chiefly symbolic. By contrast, we believe what God has revealed through the Catholic Church, namely that in the Most Holy Eucharist we have both a sacrifice and a sacrament: the holy sacrifice of the Mass by which we are redeemed by Christ's death on the Cross, and the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar by which our souls are fed by the presence of Christ in Holy Communion.

On this day therefore, more than any other, we pray for our Holy Father Pope Leo that the Lord may 'preserve him, and give him life, and make him blessed upon earth, and deliver him not up to the will of his enemies (Ps 40:3) but may, rather, 'enable him to further by his teaching and good example the salvation of those over whom he is placed, so that, with the flock entrusted to his care, he may attain life everlasting.'