

Faith in Christ's Church

As Jesus and His disciples entered rock-strewn, Caesarea Philippi, about a hundred and fifty miles north of Jerusalem, Jesus stopped and asked His Apostles, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” (Matt 16:13). Little did they realize it, but this question would prove to have far greater consequences than seeming to merely indulge curiosity.

On Sunday, November 4th, the Maronite Rite began its new liturgical year with *Consecration of the Church Sunday*. This is the first of two Sundays dedicated to the Church which form a little introduction to the first Season of the Year — the *Season of Announcements* (the Maronite equivalent of Advent). Now, if you think about it, the week preceding *Consecration of the Church Sunday* has also had its share of feasts dedicated to the Church, and it's even possible to see how these coincide with the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity.

On Thursday, we celebrated the feast of All Saints, remembering the members of the Church who are in Heaven, known as the Church Triumphant. This especially inspires our *hope* for the reward promised to all the faithful. A hope full of confidence that one day, we too, will be up there celebrating with our ancestors and all our brothers and sisters who make up the citizens of Heaven. Then on Friday we remembered All the Souls who are on their way to Heaven, but are still being purified in Purgatory. These make up the Church Suffering, and the feast of All Souls should especially arouse our *charity* towards these suffering souls who are in need of our prayers and sacrifices. Finally we come to this feast, which seems to be an excellent opportunity to grow in *faith*, especially in light of the Gospel passage presented to us.

In the Gospel for *Consecration of the Church Sunday*, we see the close connection between faith and the Church. Our Lord asks His Apostles, “who do men say that the Son of man is?” and they reply with some of the things they had heard other people say,

“Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” These are the responses of people who are judging with human judgments, who are wise in the ways of the world, but not in the ways of God. In a word, these are the opinions of people without the supernatural virtue of Faith. In fact, to this day, you can still find people saying that Christ is only one of the prophets, or just a nice guy, or merely a myth.

But now our Lord asks His Apostles, “but who do YOU say that I am?” And St. Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Now a modern cynic might be tempted to say that St. Peter had hit on a lucky guess, or that he was merely repeating what he'd heard somewhere or another. But as though to dispel any such illusions, Jesus immediately proclaims that “flesh and blood has not revealed this but my Father Who is in Heaven.” God, Who is the source of all grace and revelation, reveals this great mystery of the Incarnation to St. Peter. He is the source of our faith, and all the graces that we receive (see Eph. 2:8).

Jesus responds to St. Peter's inspired profession of faith in by revealing to him his own identity, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.” Those who believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God should also believe in the divine institution of His Church. These words spoken by our Lord, Himself, are full of meaning.

First, the change of name is significant. In the Old Testament, a change of name came with a change of mission. In the book of Genesis, Abram sets off to follow God's call into the wilderness. When he was ninety-nine years old, God made a covenant with him, announcing that Abram would be the father of a multitude of nations (Gen 17:1-4). With this new mission, Abram receives a new name — Abraham — meaning father of a multitude.

Simon's name is similarly changed to Peter, meaning rock, to signify his new role in Christ's Church. That role is revealed in the words, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19). Isaiah 22:22, referring to the office of Eliakim, the chief steward of the king, reads: "And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." It was thus understood that whoever held the keys acted with the authority of the king himself, and to bind and loose, to open and shut, refers to the power to allow or forbid something. Hence what our Lord is telling Simon Peter is that He is giving him all the authority of a chief steward, and to this day we call the Holy Father the *Vicar* of Jesus Christ on earth¹.

When our Lord uttered these words, it may have required more faith to believe that Christ's Church would never be overcome despite the fiercest attacks of "the gates of Hell." On that first Good Friday, when the Apostles were scattered and the Church seemed to be scattered with them, it almost looked like our Lord's words had failed. When the innumerable persecutions of the first decades of the Church broke out, it may have raised doubts whether the barque of Peter would weather the storm. But today, having witnessed nearly two thousand years of attempts from Hell to crush the Church, we are in a position to see how true our Lord's words were and continue to be. And this should strengthen our Faith in *all* that He promised us, as well as in His continued guidance of His Church. For we know that the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church will never be

overcome, whether from within or without!

And so we see this scene, as it were, repeated down the centuries: St. Peter's successor and the Church witnessing to the world of God's love for us in His Incarnation, Passion and death on the Cross, Resurrection and ascension into Heaven; pointing out the Son of God, the only means for salvation and – ultimately – true happiness, and calling out from one generation to the next, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38) and "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:2). And at the same time, our Lord continuing to uphold His Church, revealing her true strength in Him and her great destiny to bring souls to everlasting life.

And, as this feast also reminds us, we as consecrated members of the Church — all of us set aside for God by our Baptism, (and, all the more so, those of us offered through our vows) — are called to do what St. Peter did, that is, to witness to the divinity of Christ; to be the leaven in today's world. We do this by our faith in Him and His Church which are reflected in our lives, our words, and our actions. This being the Year of Faith, hopefully all of us will deepen our faith, first and foremost by begging God to increase the gift of Faith in us, and then by deepening our understanding of its truths, found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (the one source singled out by the Holy Father in his announcement of the *Year of Faith*), and by living them, especially as we prepare to begin this holy *Season of Announcements* — a time especially dedicated to reflecting on the Incarnation of the Son of God. ✠

¹ From *Jesus, Peter & the Keys* by Butler, Scott, Norman Dahlgren, and David Hess..