

8-24-08 - The Church is here to stay ... but not in its present form.

Father Ken Lasch, Father Lasch's Personal website

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time 'A'

Although I have driven through the town of Princeton many times, I welcome the opportunity with enthusiasm. I am in awe of the antiquity represented in the venerable gothic buildings that with quiet dignity grace the campus speaking of another age and yet revealing a persistent determination to interact with generation upon generations of students who pass through their doors. But the buildings are not the university; they are only the structures that house the wisdom that is imparted in lectures, libraries and a variety of impromptu debates about one or another issue 'on tap.'

It occurred to me during a recent visit that this is a university that will never close. Only a few hundred years old, despite cultural changes and philosophical disputes, it remains a respected university of world renown.

My brief reflection turned quickly to our venerable old Church—not this building but the 'eklesia,' the gathering of the faithful who come to this building or to any church building that houses the wisdom that has been 'celebrated' among Christians in the Catholic tradition down through the ages since the time of Christ.

Despite controversies and sharp divisions, scandals, corruption of one pope or another, indeed of many popes, and high level compromises with truth within the Church even to the present, the promise of Jesus Christ to Peter has never been broken. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!"

It's a controversial text, to be sure, open to a variety of interpretations. Yet I doubt that you will find any Christian—east or west; Catholic or Protestant, who does not find in those words of Christ, the confident assurance of God's provident care and protective concern for the assembly of those who have accepted Christ and through baptism have committed themselves to live according to his teachings.

This does not exclude or cast judgment on other Christians or non-Christians of other Godly traditions or those with no tradition at all. Few are the Christian theologians and preachers who do not conclude that ultimately, God is mystery. Whatever God's title, Elohim, Eloha, Allah, or Allot, or even Yahweh, God is mystery and no human mind can completely grasp the fullness of this mystery as no church edifice be it one of the great basilicas or a simple stone chapel in the woods can express fully the beauty of God's inner life nor give adequate testimony to the faith of those who assemble within its walls.

I believe this is what St Paul is attempting to express in his extraordinary testimony of faith to which we listened only minutes ago:

"O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are God's judgments

and how inscrutable God's ways!

'For who has known the mind of the Lord?'

For from God and through God and to God are all things.

To God be the glory forever. Amen."

Biblical scholars all agree that Matthew had a reason for situating the dialogue between Jesus and Peter in Caesarea Philippi, a city outside the domain of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, approximately twenty-five miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. The area was scattered with Syrian temples of Baal worship. One author has noted that the city was the location of more than fourteen temples of one kind or another.

However, the original city was named after Pan, the great pagan god of nature. There was a huge cavern near the great Mount Hermon that was said to contain the headwaters of the Jordan River. So despite the small

number of Jews in this area, their ancient faith was “in the air” as it were. Elijah crossed the Jordan and Jesus was baptized in the Jordan.

But there was something more. On the mountain stood an immense temple covered with white marble so bright that it appeared to mock the sun it reflected. It was built by Herod the Great as a testament to the “godhead” of Caesar.

In this incredibly dramatic setting, Matthew places this homeless carpenter who is also a penniless prophet and itinerant preacher with a faithful group of twelve apostles to impart his wisdom to them in the face of pagan gods and Caesar himself, a subtle yet remarkable challenge to Jew and gentile that God’s domain would eventually prevail.

“Who do people say that I am?”

What was in the mind of Jesus in asking this question? Was he fully aware of his messianic destiny at this point? Was he testing it out on the apostles? Or was he unsure and simply attempting to get feedback much as we in the pursuit of our call and career, and vocational choices?

Matthew seems at this point at least to be of the conviction that indeed this Jesus is the long awaited Christ-Messiah, the anointed of God, the one so identified with God that he could be called ‘Son of God.’ It was for Matthew a turning point in Jesus ministry as well as a turning point in the life of the apostles.

Moreover, although there is some difference of opinion about the reasons for Jesus’ dialogue with Peter, all Christians seem to agree on his preeminence among the twelve apostles.

Contemporary mainstream Catholic theologians today also agree that Jesus did not blueprint the Church nor establish an organized institution as we experience it today. This is not to deny the fact that the Church is rooted in Christ. It is simply to acknowledge the human dimension of the institution and the fact that as such it has suffered the effects of human frailty and even the effects of the sinfulness of its members from top to bottom beginning with Peter who denied his master three times! Some would even suggest that the present form of the Church is slowly evaporating and giving birth to a new reality that reflects more clearly the collaborative nature of God who partners with humanity—men and women—in the work of creation and redemption.

In many ways, the Church is like a large university. It is multi-layered, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. It defies juridical definition and though it surely contains elements of the kingdom of God, it cannot be equated with it – not yet.

Peter was entrusted with the stewardship of the Church. That’s what the keys symbolize as they did in ancient Israel when they were taken from Shebna, steward of Hezekiah and given to Eliakim, son of Hilkiah.

Although the Pope enjoys certain preeminence among the college of bishops, he is not Peter. He and they are the primary stewards, collaborators in service, the first among the servants God’s wisdom in Jesus Christ not only in word, but also in deed. They are held to that wisdom and must abide by the wisdom that subsists in the entire body we call the Church. Peter and his collaborators must dialogue with this assembly we call ‘Church’ as did Jesus with his companions and followers. The Spirit of God has been entrusted to the whole community of believers and it is in this dialogue that the wisdom of God emerges.

To the extent that Peter and the other pastors of the Church fail to engage the faithful in respectful dialogue or attempt to veil the truth with regressive euphemisms that diminish transparency, will the impact of the Gospel be rendered less effective and hasten the evaporation process toward a new reality.

It is the witness of the Apostles that is important, not their names or their status.

You and I are called to be witnesses, indeed, stewards of God's word and of Jesus' promises. Our witness to truth must be strong. Our faithfulness is assured if we remain committed to integrity, the 'umbrella' virtue of our age within our Church and in the world.

As with the university, we may not know all the ins and outs of its inner governance but its diversity and episodic dissensions and even its scandals cannot be hidden. Nevertheless, the promise of Jesus remains firm. He will not abandon us. The Church of all the faithful will flourish in time and the glory of God will ultimately prevail.

Now go and explain this to your children.