

21A 2020 SML
MT 16:13-20

Have you ever heard anyone say, “I do not need a Church standing between me and God?” This is like saying, “I do not want the United States Government standing between me and America.” Current day anarchists are saying something like that. To say I want no one between God and me is not Christian because it implies that your brother is a barrier to God’s grace and not a means to it.

- ✓ Did not Our Lord make love of God inseparable from love of neighbor, when he said the First Commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and the second IS JUST LIKE the first, to love your neighbor as yourself.” (MT 22:37-38)
- ✓ Did He not teach us to pray in the context of “Our” Father, “Our” daily bread, “Our trespasses,” rather than “My” Father, “My” daily bread, and “My” trespasses?

And if God is a Father, then then the others united to Him are brothers and sisters, and therefore our religion must be social.

Several years ago, when parishioners put their “I LOVE MY CHURCH” signs on the front lawns, a woman from a nearby neighborhood made an appointment to see me. She wasn’t a member of St. Mary of the Lakes. She wasn’t even a Christian. She made the appointment to tell me how much she

mind the signs all over her neighborhood. "I'm one of the only ones who doesn't have one." I asked her if she would like one? She said, "NO. I want them taken down." I said I wouldn't take them down. For us, religion is not a private thing. Just said the city goes on top of the hill. The light goes on top of the bushel basket. But she doesn't want any reminder of a Church and she's not even a member.

You cannot practice religion alone any more than you can love alone. If you were the only person in town, could you be charitable? If, then, you cannot be kind alone, or sacrifice alone, or be generous alone, how do you expect to be religious alone? As generosity implies a neighbor, as patriotism implies fellow countrymen, so religion implies fellow men in relation to God.

Here's a question. How do you come in contact with God in Jesus? How do you know His Truth and His Will? You contact Him the same way mankind contacted God before the coming of Christ. Was religion ever a purely individual affair or was it corporate? Did God deal with individuals directly, or through a race, a society, or a community? Search the Scriptures, and you will find God always dealt with mankind

through a race, a society or a community, all presided over by a divinely appointed head.

First it was Noah through whom salvation would come to humanity. Very likely, at the time of the flood, every individual might have liked to have had his own personal row boat, but God saved them in the ark, in His own way, and under His own divinely appointed captain Noah. Noah was followed by new heads of this spiritual corporation, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and others.

And so it came to pass that the most important word in the Old Testament was the word for this community, this body, this congregation, this society. And that word in Hebrew was *kahal*. Now, about 200 years before Christ, the Jews translated their scriptures into Greek. That was because so many Jews were living away from Israel and in the Greek speaking world. When the translators came to the Jewish word *kahal*, they translated it to the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means, “that which is called out,” signifying its members had been called out by God from the secular nations. *Ecclesia* means Church.

When finally, God came to earth in the person of Our Blessed Lord, it was only natural to expect He would continue to deal with mankind in the same way He had dealt with it

before, namely, through a corporation presided over by a head whom He Himself would choose.

That's the background for today's gospel. In today's gospel, we are at the point in Jesus' ministry when Our Blessed Lord took his twelve disciples on a road trip. It's one of the biggest journeys of His adult life and probably farther than any of the disciples would have ventured on their own. They go to an unlikely destination: Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was sort of like "an ancient Las Vegas on steroids." The main attraction of Caesarea Philippi was a temple located in front of an enormous cave that descended into nowhere, a bottomless pit, if you will. The grotto temple was dedicated to the Greek god Pan, and the cult worship of this particular god was wild, as in wildly hedonistic and wildly savage. Locals called the place the gates of Hades or the gates of Hell, and with good reason. It was believed to be the entrance to hell. Ironically, it is also the source, or headwaters of the River Jordan. Jesus takes His disciples there:

- ✓ not to preach or teach,
- ✓ not to heal or forgive anyone,
- ✓ and not to convert a single soul.

He takes them there so Caesarea Philippi will be the backdrop for two big announcements. The first is Peter's big announcement, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

This is the first time that any of them gets it right when it comes to understanding Who Jesus really is. It's a big moment, and Jesus takes advantage of it to make a second big announcement. His is one of the biggest announcements of all time. It's up there with:

- ✓ God's announcement to Abraham that there is a God;
- ✓ His announcement to Moses that there is a law;
- ✓ His announcement to David that his throne would last forever;
- ✓ His announcement to Mary that He is sending His Son.

He announces, "I say to you, you are Peter (and here's the play on words, in Aramaic [the language Jesus spoke] and in Greek, the word *petra* {Peter} means rock . . . and upon this rock, I will build my Church, my *ecclesia*, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

What Jesus is telling His disciples is big news. This is the plan, and this is the "whole" plan. For the rest of history, this is where Jesus will live, and nobody and no thing, not even the

gates of hell (which we just happen to be standing in front of) will stop Him. The plan is that Jesus will live in this *ecclesia*. Jesus will teach through this *ecclesia* just as He taught on the mountain of the Beatitudes. His listeners at the Sermon on the Mount will have no advantage over us who read the Church's encyclicals. Through this *ecclesia*, He will continue to forgive sins, just as he forgave the sins of the publican and the woman caught in adultery. They would have no advantage over us who stand in front of a confessional.

And though this Truth and Power and Holiness are communicated through poor weak human beings in His *ecclesia*, that Truth and Power and Holiness cannot be polluted any more than sunshine can be polluted because it shines through a dirty window. Human nature is only the instrument of forgiveness and truth. It is not the cause.

To drive home the message that Christ acts through His *ecclesia*, recall the story of St. Paul who persecuted the *ecclesia* in the City of Damascus. The heavens were opened and the glorified Christ spoke to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? Christ and the *ecclesia* are the same. Christ is alive and well with us in the Church today.

If Christianity were only the memory of someone who lived 2000 years ago, and who cannot communicate His Truth to us in this pandemic, in this less than peaceful world in 2020, and before an election that could go either way, then Christianity is not worth preserving.

Just as Jesus once taught and governed and sanctified through His human nature taken from Mary, so He now teaches, governs and sanctifies through His *ecclesia*.

When I kneel before a priest in confession, I see Christ's absolving hand and hear His Voice that tells me to go and sin no more.

When I see the Host and the chalice lifted up at Mass, I believe it is Christ's commandment fulfilled, "Do this in memory of Me."

When I see the *ecclesia* persecuted and mocked, I see Christ once more whipped at the pillar, crowned with thorns and spat upon, as I remember His words, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before you." (JN 15:18)

And as I hear that *ecclesia* articulate for me in an uncharted world the teachings of Christ, I am consoled, for what I want is a truth that is right not when the world is right, but a truth that is right when the world is wrong.