

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
22 August 2021
“You have the words of eternal life”

Last month, I promised that I would preach today about church authority. To introduce that topic, however, I’d first like us to take a brief detour into cinematic history. How many of you have seen the classic 1987 film, *The Princess Bride*? For those of you who haven’t, the opening scenes introduce us to the beautiful maiden, Buttercup, and to Wesley, a servant farm-boy. Wesley demonstrates not just obedience, but also love, for Buttercup, by humbly submitting to her every command with three simple words, “As you wish.”

In contrast, in today’s Gospel, some of Jesus’ followers seem light-years away from such loving humility. When Jesus insisted that they must consume his very flesh in order to have eternal life, they did not respond, “As you wish.” Instead, John tells us, “Many of Jesus’ disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’ ...As a result, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

Peter had a very different response. When Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, “Do you also want to leave?” Simon Peter answered him, ‘Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the holy one of God.’” Peter’s response is a stunning act of trust and faith. Peter and the other apostles were just like those disciples walking away; they did not yet understand what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the Bread of Life.” They wouldn’t even begin to understand it until the Last Supper. But here, despite defections by others, Peter stood firm because he

recognized Jesus' authority as the holy one of God, the one who had the words of eternal life. In effect, Peter's heart cried out to the Lord, "As you wish." He humbly submitted to Jesus' authority, even when he couldn't completely understand his teaching.

Even more amazing is what Jesus does with his divine authority—he shares it with mere mortals. At the Last Supper, he told his apostles, "Do this in memory of me"—giving all priests down through the ages the authority and power to make him truly present on our altars—body and blood, soul and divinity. Then, after the Resurrection, Jesus gave his apostles the profound authority to forgive people's sins in his name.

He also gave his disciples the authority to teach in his name. When Jesus sent them out two by two to heal people and declare that the reign of God was at hand, he said, "He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me [a]nd...rejects him who sent me." Later, Jesus gave his apostles the authority to teach in his name what is and is not acceptable among God's people. Finally, just before his Ascension, Jesus declared, "Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth." He then shared that divine authority with his apostles, immediately commissioning them to, "Make disciples of all nations...Teach[ing] them to carry out everything I have commanded you."

This God-given authority to teach in His name was affirmed at Vatican II when the Council Fathers declared, "This sacred Council teaches that the Bishops...have taken the place of the Apostles as pastors of the Church: he who hears them, hears Christ; he who spurns them, spurns Christ, and Him who sent Christ." The purpose of this

divinely-commissioned teaching authority—which we call the Magisterium—is described in the Catechism: “It is the task of the Magisterium to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error.” In other words, the teaching authority of the Church is a gift from God so that we can know with certainty what is right and what is wrong. It is a gift of spousal love to preserve and protect the Church—the Bride of Christ.

Speaking of brides, let’s briefly return once more to *The Princess Bride*. You may recall that the criminal, Vizzini, secretly kidnapped Buttercup. When his two sidekicks reported several times that they were being followed, Vizzini, despite all evidence to the contrary, repeatedly declared that such pursuit was “Inconceivable!” Finally, Inigo Montoya, the Spanish swordsman, noted, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

The same could be said of the word “infallible.” Many people—Catholic and non-Catholic alike— misunderstand its meaning. The Church’s teaching on infallibility comes from Jesus’ commitment to Peter in Matthew’s Gospel: “I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Think about that. Because sin and error cannot exist in heaven, Jesus would not have made that promise unless he could guarantee that the apostles and their successors would be protected from error here on earth. Over the centuries, the Church came to understand that guarantee as infallibility. As the Catechism says, “In order to preserve

the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to [give] her a share in his own infallibility.”

Today I would like to clear up three misunderstandings about infallibility. One is easy to explain; the other two are a bit more problematic. So, first, the easy one—in case you were wondering, the pope’s infallibility does not mean that he can predict with certainty that the Brewers will win the World Series, or that the Packers will win the Super Bowl or that the Bucks will repeat as NBA champs. Infallibility provides the pope with no advantages at the casino or the racetrack or the lottery window. Infallibility also does not imply that the Pope is without sin. Instead, infallibility, in the Catholic context, has a very specific meaning. Infallibility is exercised when the supreme teaching authority of the Church “proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith and morals.”

Now, with that definition in mind, let’s consider the other two misunderstandings, both of which I have heard promoted from the pulpit by priests. In a recent sermon, one such priest lamented that we’ve endured “...60 years of widespread failure to transmit the Catechism of the Catholic Church to the people, pure and unadulterated.” But in that very same sermon, he failed as well by seriously misrepresenting the Church’s teaching on infallibility. He said, “In the last 2000 years...infallible statements have been made maybe 4-7 times. That’s it. Anything else is an opinion.”

That priest was wrong on two counts. First, he was wrong to suggest that infallibility has been exercised by the Church only a handful of times. He *was* correct that popes have rarely used their authority to define infallible dogma on their own. The most recent

instance was in 1950, when Pope Pius XII formally proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, which we celebrated last week.

However, papal infallibility is only one aspect of this extraordinary gift. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that, not only can the Pope speak infallibly on his own, but he also may speak infallibly together with the other bishops of the world, particularly at Ecumenical Councils, of which there have been 21 over the course of the Church's history. When such councils formally propose infallible doctrines, the Catechism reminds us that they, too, "must be adhered to with the obedience of faith." Such infallible teachings have been defined many times down through the centuries.

The priest I quoted was also wrong when he indicated that, other than infallible statements, "Anything else is an opinion." The Church actually teaches, however, that we are bound to abide by all authoritative Church teachings, even those *not* proclaimed infallibly. The Catechism says that the Magisterium may "propose a teaching that leads to a better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals, [even] without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a definitive manner." [Even t]o this ordinary teaching the faithful 'are to adhere...with religious assent.'" According to Vatican II, this religious assent means that "the response called for is the religious submission of will and intellect." So, if we are called to obediently submit our will and intellect even to ordinary teachings, then these are clearly much more authoritative than just "opinions."

Perhaps an analogy will help us understand this. The U.S. Constitution is the supreme "truth" in our secular legal hierarchy. That does not mean, however, that we are free to ignore or disobey other

laws. Federal laws and regulations; state constitutions, laws, and regulations; local laws and ordinances—these are not merely opinions. Rather, all of these are binding as well, and if we violate them, there are consequences. Now, is a local pet ordinance as significant as the Bill of Rights? Of course not, but it is still authoritative and we can be cited or fined for violating it. The same is true with Church teachings about faith and morals—not all are necessarily equally important and not all are invested with the highest level of authority, but they *are* still authoritative—and therefore merit our respect and obedience.

Does this mean that everything the Pope says requires either the obedience of faith or at least religious assent? Absolutely not. Even less are all of the pronouncements of individual bishops protected from error. But when the Magisterium speaks—particularly when the Pope, either alone or in communion with the bishops, does make a doctrinal proclamation about faith or morals—we are bound to abide by that teaching. In effect, we are called to declare to the Lord, “As you wish,” no matter how difficult it might be to obey.

Do disciples of Jesus Christ always do that? Unfortunately, no. In today’s gospel passage, many of Jesus’ disciples could not accept his teaching about the Bread of Life. They rejected his authority and walked away. We’ve seen the same thing many times throughout the Church’s history, and next month, I’ll consider an example of that—when many Catholics either ignored, or even left the Church in response to, an authoritative papal teaching.

For now, I would just ask you to reflect on this: when we reject the divine authority which Jesus Christ lovingly gave to his Church, we are re-enacting the original sin of humanity. That primordial sin of

Adam and Eve was the explicit rejection of God’s authority. Prompted by Satan, their actions declared that, for them, God’s authority was null and void. They dared to claim that their authority superseded the authority of God; by so doing, they became victims of their own pride. We are all well aware of the bitter consequences of their disobedience.

The antidote for such pride is humility before the authority of God--that same authority which he has shared with the Magisterium. So, let’s pray for the same humble faith that Simon Peter showed in today’s Gospel. Even though others were leaving, even though Jesus’ words were difficult to fathom and to follow, Peter and the others *trusted* him; they had “come to believe” that Jesus had the words of eternal life, even when they couldn’t fully understand those words.

Let’s pray for the humility to do the same even when we don’t always fully understand some of our Church’s teachings. When the will of the Lord is revealed to us through the Magisterium, may we respond as Wesley did to his beloved in *The Princess Bride*, saying, “As you wish.” May we trust the promise of *our* beloved, Jesus Christ, that his Spirit would lead us into all Truth regarding faith and morals. May we believe that, as Jesus said, when we hear the apostles and their successors, we hear Jesus himself. Finally, let us thank Jesus, the Lamb of God, for giving us the Magisterium—this great gift of spousal love—so that at the end of time, *his* Bride, the Church, might be presented to Him pure, spotless, and unblemished at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb.