

## **Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2014**

The readings of this Sunday talk about leadership. They show that true leadership is that which recognizes God's authority as the ultimate foundation of one's own authority. They invite us to build our leadership on a strong foundation, which is God.

The first reading describes the discontent of God with one of the superintendents of the King's palace who was in charge of administering his goods. It shows that by rejecting him, God chose a replacement for him and gave him the attributions that the master of the palace had before. It shows also that because of that choice, the elected received full authority over the house of Israel and the power to decide for its destiny.

What is behind this text is the idea that every authority comes from God. There is also the idea that unfaithfulness to God's commands brings dismissal and rejection. Finally, there is the idea that, because the authority comes from God, God confers upon his elect the legitimacy to decide for the destiny of his people.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus confers on Peter the authority over the destiny of the Church. First of all, the Gospel starts with the trip of Jesus to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It reports on the question Jesus asked his disciples to know what people said about him and gives the different opinions of people about it.

Then, the Gospel reports on the answer of the disciples to the same question when Jesus asked them about his identity. It reports on Peter's answer as he confessed that Jesus was Christ, the son of the living God. Then, it reports on the reaction of Jesus who found that Peter's response was inspired by God and not by humans.

After that, the Gospel reports on Jesus' promise to make Peter a rock on which he builds his church and to protect the Church against the forces of the netherworld. It equally reports on Jesus' promise to give Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the power to decide over the destiny of the Church.

Finally, the Gospel ends with the silence that Jesus imposed on the disciples not to talk about his true identity.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today I want to talk about the spiritual leadership of the Church. In fact, as an organized body, the Church cannot live without leadership and direction. Leadership and authority are needed for the survival of the Church, for its organization and for the direction of the people of God.

The Church's leadership and direction are not modeled on human authority, but on criteria other than those used to run human society. The leadership of the Church is first of all a mission of love at the service of the people of God and a search for the spiritual good of the people of God in order to bring them to eternal salvation.

The Church's leadership is exemplified in the teaching and the action of Jesus. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John (10: 11), "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" or again, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15: 13). That is what Jesus has taught and lived.

However, human experience has shown that when people are beneficiaries of some good actions, their attention is more focused on the benefice received than on the

benefactor. It is in that context that Jesus, who had been teaching and performing signs throughout the land, wanted to know if the people have come to know him. Unfortunately, their opinions did not translate his true identity. They took him as one of their ancient prophets. Only Simon Peter could really tell who Jesus truly was.

But, here is a question: how did it happen that Peter succeeded on the test and the people failed? He succeeded because throughout his listening to and watching Jesus, he had cultivated a relationship with him. Thanks to that relationship, he has come to realize that there was more in Jesus than what people thought. Of course, it was God's revelation. But, the truth is that God reveals himself only to those who are eager to look for him and wait for the signs of his presence.

That is why it is important that we build a relationship with Jesus. Such a relationship is built through prayer, devotion, readings and meditation of the word of God, etc. The advantage of building a relationship is that it makes us people of an interior life, who ponder everything we hear from Jesus, than just being simple listeners who are not affected by what we hear. That is why I believe also that we have to give a fresh and personal answer to the question of Jesus today: "Who do you say that I am"?

Our response will help us better understand the response of Peter to the same question. The response of Peter clarifies the identity of Jesus and sheds light on his leadership. In fact, Jesus leads on behalf of God, because he is the Son of the living God. The words he pronounces are not his, but those of his Father, because he speaks through him. The works he performs are those of his Father, because the Father lives in him.

In the same way, the leadership of Peter will be on behalf of Jesus and at the example of Jesus. And when Jesus says that Peter is a rock on which he will build his Church, he makes him a leader who acts on his behalf in order to lead God's people to eternal salvation. That leadership will never fail, because the negative forces of hell will never defeat the power of God that maintains the Church alive.

By giving to Peter the keys and the power to bind and loose, Jesus has established him in a position of leadership and authority over the Church. He has given him the charge of leading, feeding and defending the flock. As we leave our keys to trusted friends when we go on vacation so that they look after our home, so did Jesus in entrusting the care of the Church to Peter.

That role of responsibility and leadership continues today through the leadership of the pope who maintains the faith and the unity of the Church in Jesus Christ. That leadership is part of God's plan for his Church. Let us pray today for our pope Francis that he might be blessed in his mission to lead us. May those who have particular responsibility in the Church work for the unity of the people of God! May God bless you all!

**Isaiah 22, 19-23; Romans 11, 33-36; Matthew 16, 13-20**



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