Trusting in the Teaching Authority of the Church

Cardinal John Heenan, who was the Archbishop of Westminster, England, was once asked what makes the Catholic Church distinctive. You might think he would say love or compassion. These are certainly parts of the faith, but he said something a bit startling: authority. As another preacher pointed out, we share love and compassion with other faiths. But authority is something Christ gave to Peter when He told him to feed His lambs and gave Him the keys of the kingdom. We also believe that authority has been handed down to his successors and the successors of the apostles, which is why on the Vatican Flag the silver and gold keys are present, symbolizing the power of binding and loosing. The question for us is how do we view the authority of the Church? Is it as suggestions, or do we view it as something exercised with love that gives us a blueprint for how we should live?

Last Monday, we celebrated the Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica, (a major feast that takes the place of a Sunday in Ordinary Time when falling on a Sunday). It's feast celebrates something seemingly strange, a building. Why do we celebrate this day all over the world, and not just in Rome, where the basilica is? The answer is because the Lateran Basilica is no ordinary building. It is the mother Church of Rome, but beyond that, is the mother Church for all Catholics, as it is the Church of the Bishop of Rome, the Holy Father. It's a stunningly beautiful place to see, but even more beautiful is what it represents: the significance of our Church united around the successor of Peter.

So, a question is how do we view the role of the Church in our lives today?

From an early age, authority can be quite frustrating. We don't like to be told when to go to bed, or clean our room. And as we age, we can make those decisions on our own. But there is still, I think, sometimes that inclination that we can do it all on our own, and that no one should stand in our way. But if we think about it, those with authority like mom and dad growing up didn't use authority to get in our way. They used it to help us reach our potential. If we stay up late we'll be sluggish the next day. If we don't clean the house, we'll live in filth and it'll look bad when others come over. If we don't brush our teeth, we'll be in greater pain from a cavity. The list goes on and on.

The Church doesn't look at us like the overly strict parent who simply tells kids what to do, rather than explaining things. The Church stresses we always have to follow our conscience, but we have to inform it. The Church also teaches in *Lumen Gentium*, a Vatican II document, that the bishops are teachers who are given the authority of Christ, and that we have to do our part to submit to them in intellect and will. Why is that? Because they have one desire – to see as many people in heaven as possible. As such, they are going to do things that aren't "PC" at times. But they also do this humbly. The document states the bishop uses authority not for glory, but "only for the edification of their flock in truth and holiness, remembering that he who is greater should become as the lesser and he who is the chief become as the servant." We look to the bishops to help guide us through this world and interpret revelation. But, believe it or not, the bishops

also look to us. That document also says “let him not refuse to listen to his subjects, whom he cherishes as his true sons and exhorts to cooperate readily with him.”

And so, where does that leave us? I’d invite us to keep in mind just a few things.

One, it takes time. By that, I mean we’re going to often struggle with things. There are top-tier teachings, like dogmas, such as Jesus died and rose from the dead, and that life is sacred, that we all have to keep or we can’t really call ourselves Catholic. There are other teachings that are still important, but are OK if you struggle with. You might grapple with these things over a lifetime, teachings on things like the death penalty, or contraception. The key is to keep grappling, rather than walking by that section of the buffet if you will. So many people ignore the things we don’t like. Struggling, questioning, or even saying “I love the Church, I just am having a hard time with that right now” does not make us a bad Catholic. In fact, I think it won’t be until after we leave this world that everything will be made clear to us.

Second, we have to remember that we are priest, prophet and king through our baptism. In our Gospel that day, Jesus overturns the moneychangers’ tables in the Temple. Jesus is filled with zeal as He sees people treating the Temple like any other ordinary building, when it is God’s house. Our souls need zeal too for the faith. Living out the faith can be tough, especially when we are trying to evangelize. There are so many things we can do to plant mustard seeds. We can seize chances to talk about what the Church teaches. For instance, talking about how faith informs our politics or moral choices in conversation with people. Or, invite someone to Mass; or just let them know you are praying for them and perhaps pray with them. So often that voice inside can whisper that we should just talk about the weather or the “light” stuff. But we need to remember that just like a bishop, we shepherd people too. We need to gently help people to see God’s love for them by never stopping to plant those seeds.

And finally, we need to always be patient with others and ourselves too. When we try to evangelize ourselves by learning the faith or others, progress can be slow. That’s quite OK – we need to let go and let God, and take a page from Jesus, who was patient with the apostles. Over time, they came to embrace the faith and teach it boldly; but it didn’t happen overnight. But by keeping at it, amazing things happened. The same is true with ourselves and others. That loved one might not be next to us at Mass on Sunday now, or next week, but because of continually planting those mustard seeds and not using unhelpful lines such as “what’s wrong with you, you must go to Mass” or “if you believe that then you shouldn’t go to Mass at all,” and instead being patient with people, amazing things can really happen too.

Finally, remember the words of Saint Paul, where Saint Paul says: “You are God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9). We are each the building of God. And my hope is that, just as the life-giving waters flow out of the Temple, they also flow out of you and me. That happens when we grow in the faith, and take each and every opportunity to speak about it over a lifetime. It also means respecting the body of others, remembering God dwells in

them, which we try to remember before we look at a person for their politics, their appearance or beliefs.

On the day of our confirmation we said “yes” to following God throughout our lives, and we believe that the Holy Spirit, given to us is also given to the Church. Confirmation did not end our faith formation, for it is truly life-long. Let us look to the Church to guide us so we can grow in holiness and become, like the wise servants who took what they had been given by their master in this week’s gospel and paid him back with interest, show to our Lord one day a life well lived thanks in part to following and being guided by the Church He gave us.

God bless!

Fr. Paul