

“We Pray for Francis, Our Pope, and Bernard, Our Archbishop...”

These are words I say at every Mass. For, at every Mass a priest offers, there are several Eucharistic Prayers that can be used. However while the words used in each of the prayers differ a little bit, within each we always pray for the pope and the bishop of the diocese in which the Mass is being celebrated. In addition, there are also prayers throughout the week for the pope and bishop in the Liturgy of the Hours.

In today’s polarized world though, it seems the bishop(s) and the pope are looked at under a more critical light than ever. This is not to say that one cannot be critical of a bishop or pope. As a Catholic, there have been bishops and popes who I’ve greatly admired with respect to say a leadership style or particular teaching they emphasize, and some who I’ve wondered why they were emphasizing one thing over another, or not quite understood a decision they had made.

However, it is important to remember that our Catholic Church is also not a democracy. This does not mean that my opinion as a priest among many or John Q. Catholic’s opinion as one Catholic among many means nothing though. Indeed we have a synod process going on in our diocese and throughout our universal Church precisely because our bishops want our input. Throughout the Church, from the parish level through the seminaries and colleges right up to the Vatican, there are laity and clerics working together to help our Church thrive and grow.

At the same time though, there are key leadership roles that are given to the bishops who are the successors of the apostles, and to the Pope who is the Vicar of Christ. As we hear in Matthew 16:18: “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church,* and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” Jesus establishes His Church with a hierarchy. Peter is the first among equals; it’s why at the resurrection John waits for Peter to arrive at the empty tomb even though he gets there first.

This Tuesday, we celebrate in our Church the feast of the Chair of Peter. The feast refers to the occupant, not the chair itself of course. And it’s worth thinking about the role the pope plays in our Church.

For one, he is like you and me. When Pope Francis became pope, in an early interview he remarked, when asked “who are you” that “I am a sinner.” Pope Francis has also been known to go to confession in Saint Peter’s itself with others, rather than privately and out of view. Much like our first pope, Peter, who denied Jesus, and even after he had become pope, was corrected by Paul (“I opposed him to his face because he was clearly wrong” (Galatians 2:11b) for not eating with Gentiles because he didn’t want to get on the bad side of Christian converts from Judaism, Francis like all of us makes mistakes. We do not view the pope as divine or without flaws.

However with that, we also view the pope and bishops as having a unique role to play. We believe the Holy Spirit is at work in helping find our popes and bishops, and in

guiding our universal Church. Christ establishes the apostles as the first bishops with Peter as the head, and through the centuries their successors have followed. It's important to remember too that the two are never separate. Bishops may disagree on some things to a point such as administration or topics to emphasize; and one bishop may do things a little differently in his diocese than in another, but never with respect to fundamental moral teachings of the Church or to the words of the Mass itself.

The pope and bishops are there to help articulate the teachings of the Church. Our catechism says: "Bishops, with priests as co-workers, have as their first task "to preach the Gospel of God to all men," in keeping with the Lord's command. They are "heralds of faith, who draw new disciples to Christ; they are authentic teachers" of the apostolic faith "endowed with the authority of Christ." (CCC, 888). They are also there to help us grow in holiness and to govern the Church (CCC 893-896).

Many of us only see our Archbishop at confirmation or on special events. But in today's world where so much information is instant, and everyone has an opinion that they often like to highlight on social media, or where information can become quickly misinformation, it's worth asking ourselves how we look at our bishops.

Unlike a political campaign, no one is going to ask us "who to vote for" in the next papal conclave unless you are a cardinal. A bishop is also assigned after some input is given from priests and individuals in a diocese to the Holy See (though no one has asked for any input from the author of this column and I'm quite alright with that). That being said the process is careful and prayerful, and while bishops and priests do sin, sometimes in a very public, scandalous way (lest we forget, even Jesus had Judas) every bishop I have known has had a deep love for God and His Church. And in the popes I've lived and been a priest under from Saint John Paul II to now Pope Francis, in each I've seen this too. And so as a starting point, I think all of us should pray often for our bishops and pope that God will continue to help them grow in their ministry.

With that, let's make sure we listen to them too. Rarely does a pope speak "from the Chair" and issue a statement to be held by all Catholics; the last time this was done was when the Assumption and Annunciation were declared as dogmas. However popes and bishops often issue pastoral letters, encyclicals and other teachings that are designed to help us. Rather than just read a sentence or two or listen to a snippet of a speech, it's worth listening and reading to the entirety of what a bishop or pope is saying or writing mindful that they are trying to help us. It's also okay - and good - to ask questions as we do so. Maybe you'll find something you disagree with or want more information about. That's a good thing, because it means one has a thinking faith. But what's not a good thing is when we rebel. When we say "well he's too liberal, he's too conservative, and I'm not that way." If you want to break off, you'd be called a Protestant. We don't have the conservative or liberal Catholic Church or branches of the Church. We have one, holy, Catholic, apostolic Church. So let's give the chair of the bishop and Peter the respect that they deserve.

Lastly, never forget the role we all play in the Church. Right after the section on the bishops the catechism goes into the role of the laity. Again, we work together. So maybe you disagree with something you hear or read. Think it over. Pray about it. Or consider writing your bishop. Bishop Hebda values input from people and has a deep love for his flock.

On a micro level as a pastor, I know full well I must serve, but also lead; sometimes a decision or course of action won't work out, or some might not like it in a parish. But it's done with prayer, consultation and following my conscience. At the end of the day, my hope is to help the parishes I'm in, and the people I serve on their faith journey. On a much bigger level though, our bishops and pope lead us and do this for us. Christ created one Church, not many - and as part of that design He gave us a Vicar and bishops. May we pray for them, listen to them, and work with them to build up God's Kingdom.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul