

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER
CONVOCAION OF THE CLERGY OF ALASKA
CATHEDRAL COMPLEX OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE, ANCHORAGE
FEBRUARY 22, 2022

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I greet you in his name, assuring you of his prayers, spiritual closeness and paternal affection. I thank Archbishop Bellisario, Archbishop Schwietz and Bishop Zielinski for their invitation to be with you. To my brother priests, I thank you for your dedication to your ministry here at the “peripheries”, at the true frontier.

Today, we celebrate and contemplate the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, who witnessed to Jesus, declaring Him to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” We try to imitate Simon Peter, not only in his confession of faith, but also by bearing witness to Christ in the Church and in the world. Today’s feast is an ancient one, dating back at least to the fourth century in Rome. In a special way, we pray for our Holy Father, and as bishops and priests, we renew our bond of communion with the Successor of Saint Peter.

While the term “cathedra” literally means the “chair of the bishop”, it is a symbol of the authority possessed by the bishop, and, in particular, is a reference to his “magisterium”, that is, his teaching authority and to his preaching of the Gospel as a successor of the Apostles, called to safeguard and transmit the faith to the Christian community.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explained it this way:

“So what was the "Chair" of St Peter? Chosen by Christ as the "rock" on which to build the Church (cf. Mt 16: 18), he began his ministry in Jerusalem...Subsequently, the See of Peter was Antioch... where "the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (Acts 11: 26)...From there, Providence led Peter to Rome... the center of the Empire, the symbol of the "Orbis" - the "Urbs", which expresses "Orbis", the earth, where he ended his race at the service of the Gospel with martyrdom.” (BENEDICT XVI, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 22 FEBRUARY 2006)

The See of Rome, after Peter's travels, came to be recognized as the See of the Successor of Peter, and its Bishop's “cathedra” represented the mission entrusted to him by Christ to tend His entire flock. As Saint Leo the Great says:

“Christ said to blessed Peter, ‘To you I shall give the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ Certainly, the right to use this power was conveyed to all the Apostles as well. What was laid down by this decree went for all the leaders of the Church. Yet not without purpose is it handed over to one, though made known to all. It is entrusted in a unique way to Peter because the figure of Peter is set before all the rulers of the Church. (LEO THE GREAT, SERMON 83, 29 June 443)

The Cathedra of the Bishop of Rome represents not only a service to the Roman Church but also to the mission of guiding the whole People of God. Saint John Paul II describes this service:

“The liturgical Feast of the *Chair of St Peter* sheds light on the special ministry of strengthening and guiding the Church in the *unity of the faith* which the Lord entrusted to the Head of the Apostles. It consists in this *ministerium petrinum* (Petrine ministry), the particular service that the Bishop of Rome is called to render to the entire Christian people. It is an indispensable mission that is not built on human prerogatives but on Christ himself, the cornerstone of the Ecclesial Community.” (JOHN PAUL II, ANGELUS, 22 FEBRUARY 2004)

To celebrate the Chair of Saint Peter means to attribute to it a strong spiritual meaning and to recognize that is a privileged sign of love of Christ the Good Shepherd. Christ is the Good Shepherd who not only gives life to His sheep, but also gives *His life* for his sheep. He gives His life because He loves them, and for Christ each one of them is important.

We, as priests, are reminded to love each member of the flock and to care for them with a shepherd’s love. Only then will we receive our true reward. The Apostle Peter reminds us in the First Reading: “*Tend the flock of God in your midst, overseeing not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*”

It may not seem glamorous to be in remote regions of Alaska. Some of your flocks may be very small. Still, be good shepherds to them; set a good example for them. Then, you will receive the crown of glory. I will say it once more: Christ is the Good Shepherd who not only gives life to His sheep, but also gives *His life* for his sheep.

My friends, if people followed Jesus, it was because He was the *Good Shepherd*. His love for them was beautiful. He was not a moralistic Pharisee; nor was He a Sadducee, who had power at that time; nor was he a guerilla or revolutionary, trying to bring about political liberation for His people; nor was He a contemplative who stayed only in His monastery. He was a pastor, a shepherd who spoke in the language of His people, who spoke the Truth to them in love, who spoke of the things of God, without compromising with the powers of His day. This is the reason why people followed Him: He was authentic; His love was real.

Today, Pope Francis, in the name of Christ the Good Shepherd, guides the Church. Through the Successor of Saint Peter, we hear the voice of Christ. What does Pope Francis say to us?

“At this moment, the Lord repeats his question to each of us: “who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15). A clear and direct question, which one cannot avoid or remain neutral to, nor can one remand it or delegate the response to someone else. In this question there is nothing inquisitional, but rather, it is full of love! The love of our One Master, who today calls us to renew our faith in him, recognizing him as the Son of God and Lord of our life. The first one called to renew his profession of faith is the Successor of Peter, who carries the responsibility to strengthen his brothers (cf. Lk 22:32) ...

Let us allow grace to shape our hearts anew in order to believe, and to open our mouths in order to profess the faith and obtain salvation (cf. Rom 10:10). Thus, let us make our

own the words of Peter: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). May our thought and our gaze be fixed on Jesus Christ, the beginning and the end of all actions of the Church. He is the foundation and no one may lay a different one (cf. 1 Cor 3:11). He is the “rock” upon which we must build.” (FRANCIS, HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF ST. PETER, 22 FEBRUARY 2016)