

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time - Lectionary: 121

Reading 1 - [Isaiah 22:19-23](#)

Thus says the LORD to Shebna, master of the palace: "I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station. On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah; I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open. I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot, to be a place of honor for his family."

Responsorial Psalm - [Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8](#) R. (8bc) Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.

Reading 2 - [Romans 11:33-36](#)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given the Lord anything that he may be repaid? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Gospel - [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi and he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. 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. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

The Rock and the Keys: Biblical Foundations of Church Authority

From the House of David to the Papacy

The Scriptural Root of Authority

The Royal Steward

In Isaiah, the steward was "over the house," wielding paternal authority second only to the King.



Peter as the "Rock"

Jesus establishes Peter as the unshakable foundation that the gates of hell cannot prevail against.



Comparison: Davidic vs. Petrine Office

Old Testament (Isaiah 22)	New Testament (Matthew 10)
 The Official: Eliakim, son of Hilkiah	 The Official: Simon Peter, son of Jonah
 The Symbol: Key of the House of David	 The Symbol: Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven
 The Power: When he opens, no one shall shut	 The Power: Whatever you bind is bound in heaven



The Power of the Keys

"Binding and loosing" represents the authority to interpret faith and morals for the community.

The Nature and Mission of the Church

Universal Sacrament of Salvation

The visible historical instrument through which Christ communicates divine life to all humanity.



Missionary by Nature

The Church is not a social club but a body sent to conquer evil.



Four Spiritual Weapons

Believers advance the mission through Prayer, Sacraments, the Word of God, and Love.



Gemini Notebook

Summary

This homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time establishes a theological and scriptural framework for the authority of the Church and the Papacy. By drawing parallels between the Davidic "royal steward" in the Old Testament and the appointment of Peter in the New Testament, we see that ecclesial authority is not a human invention but a divine institution. The Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation," a body both human and divine that exists to continue Christ's saving mission, is a major theme. Despite modern skepticism toward institutions and authority—which I've identified as a recurring human struggle since the Fall—the Church remains the primary instrument through which God communicates grace, interprets the Word, and combats spiritual evil. All of this points to the Church as a spiritually unified body, structured around the Petrine ministry (the Pope) as Christ's Vicar. The Papacy provides the structure (Rock and Keys), while the Church's mission provides the action: breaking the gates of evil and communicating the "saving light of truth" to the world. Authority in this context is viewed as a divinely assisted service to ensure the unity of faith and the continuation of God's universal plan of salvation, as presented in last week's homily.

The Church and the Universal plan of Salvation

Insofar as the readings for this Sunday reveal God's faithfulness to His covenant with David, who we hear in the Psalm singing praises of thanksgiving to God for His covenant faithfulness, which scripture and tradition teach us is fulfilled in Christ and continues to unfold through the Church; they also clearly speak to Papal authority, the authority of the Church. This matters to our current moment in history.

Anyone who reads headlines, polls, and articles has heard that the times in which we live have given rise to history making records of a lack of trust in authority and institutions. But I think the facts of the situation don't actually reflect a history making social malaise, rather they reflect a modern peak of a human reality since the beginning of human history. Once, everything in creation was in perfect communion, until the

heavenly war against God spilled out and drew us in. God can't be trusted, said the serpent to the human heart, sowing doubt and inspiring pride. You know the story.

Since then, humanity has always had difficulty with virtue and holiness leading to issues with authority and institutions. At times there's relative calm and order, at other times it's all out rebellion. There's nothing new under the sun; human life, history, and behavior repeat in cycles, and while tools or times change, the core human experience remains the same.¹ We might agree to add that Americans excel at living in this tension. There exist an authentic desire and capacity, deep within, for 'the good' with an arguably equal desire deep within for absolute freedom. Most try to strike a reasonable balance, while retaining the unassailable individualistic right to independence and to test, choose, and replace those in authority and to tear down or build up institutions. We tend to conflate the 'sins' of our civic and social leaders and their exercise of authority, with the institutions themselves, all too often.

We have increasingly allowed this spiritual and psychological disposition to shape our understanding of the institution of the Church and her authority. Unfortunately, we tend to conveniently forget that unlike anything else, Church authority, properly understood, is from God and the institution, insofar as we can call it that, is founded by Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. She is both human and divine. Understanding the Church as simultaneously divine and human generate several critical implications that must shape how we interpret her nature, authority, and development. We ought to avoid both an "ecclesial Nestorianism" that recognizes no subsistent relationship between divine and human elements, and an "ecclesial monophysitism" that divinizes everything, leaving no space for the Church's defects and faults.² That we should have authority over her, seems, well, to bring us back to that fateful moment in the garden of communion.

Necessarily then, we must explore the nature of the Church and her authority as it is put before us in the Scriptures this weekend. In doing so we will see how the papacy has its basis within Scripture, as Christ appoints Peter as the royal steward for the new kingdom of David, understood as the Church. We can also reflect on these readings and their meaning as a continuation of last weekend's theme of God's universal plan for salvation. Picking up at the axis point, Jesus, and moving forward to the foundation of the Church and its unfolding role in salvation history. Our Lord, in handing over the keys to Peter, keys that would be handed over to his successors, the bishops of Rome, ensures that the powers of evil and death would not prevail against the Church and that the Petrine ministry would continue to watch over the unity of faith and love in the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation.

The Catholic Church is called the "universal sacrament of salvation" because she is the visible and historical instrument through which Christ continues to communicate salvation to humanity. Jesus Christ alone is the Savior, but Christ acts through the Church, especially through her proclamation of the Gospel, the sacraments, and the communion of believers. The Church is a universal sacrament particularly through the seven sacraments. Through them, divine life is communicated visibly and concretely. The sacraments are not merely religious symbols or reminders; they are effective signs and vehicles of grace. The Church is a universal sacrament particularly through the seven sacraments, which Christ entrusted to her. Through them, divine life is communicated visibly and concretely. The sacraments are not merely religious symbols or reminders; they are effective signs through which Christ acts. The Church is also a sacrament of salvation through her proclamation of the Word of God. She announces: The universal love of God; The saving death and Resurrection of Christ; The call to repentance and conversion; The hope of eternal life; The dignity and vocation of every human person. The Church's sacramental mission also

¹ Ecclesiastes 1:9

² Ralph Del Colle, "The Church," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 258–259.

includes her witness before the world. She is called to be a visible sign of: Holiness, Mercy, Truth, Justice, Unity, Reconciliation, Hope. The Church is thus: Founded by Christ; Sustained by the Holy Spirit; An instrument of Christ's saving mission; Ordered toward communion with God and among all people.

Isaiah, in our first reading today, introduces two royal stewards in the house of David in an oracle of judgement against the city of Jerusalem. We cannot properly understand what's happened in the Gospel reading if we first don't consider it in light of the first reading. The office of royal steward ought to be translated as "the one over the house," meaning that the steward was second only to the king. The royal steward evolved into one of the highest officials in the state, occupying a position of remarkable authority within the monarchy.³ As well, the royal steward was usually a Levitical priest, a "father" to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the house of Judah, language which strongly suggests paternal authority and communal leadership, attested to by the names of Priests in the history of Israel and specifically represented in the oracle through the reference to a priestly robe and sash. This reading allows us to better understand the role of the royal steward that is carried on through the new royal steward, Peter and his successors. Thus, it's important to recognize the similarities between the royal steward in the Kingdom of David and the role of the Pope in the Church.

We should pause here to recall that overarching theme of God's plan of salvation, to which St. Paul refers in the second reading. Neither the first reading nor the Gospel can be properly understood apart from this. An attitude of wonder and awe in the face of God's gifts is something shared by all the saints, and this is what we see exemplified in the second reading. St. Paul, after spending three chapters of his Letter to the Romans analyzing and explaining the complex twists and turns of salvation history, breaks out in a hymn of wonder and awe: "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*" St. Paul is praising God for the extraordinary way in which God's promises are fulfilled regarding salvation, being offered to all the people of Israel along with the Gentiles, a continuance of God's covenant faithfulness. In this period, there were many Israelites who had lost their Israelite identity and were scattered among the Gentiles. Yet, through the Gentiles entering into the Church and accepting the Lord's teaching, these scattered Israelites came into the as well. As a Roman citizen and a Pharisee, St. Paul was uniquely experienced and educated which disposed him to understand more broadly.

This is St. Paul's point. Since all fall short—Jew and Gentile alike—all are equally indebted to the hidden means of salvation through God that are too complicated for the human mind to unravel. No human effort, unaided by God through revelation, can ever be able to fathom every manner by which God is at work for the salvation of the world. This is why St. Paul can say in today's reading confidently: "*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*" His poetic cry could only come to its fullness as a gift of grace through faith. Ultimately, the passages for this Sunday are not about recognizing human rank but have more to do with the spiritual reality required to recognize God at work in the world. It is about the faith needed to recognize divine authority in the person of Jesus. St. Peter captures for us the essential function of faith as the foundation for experiencing Jesus as the Christ. Only faith could have led St. Peter to say what he did. He needed faith to recognize the Savior, Messiah, King in the dusty human figure standing before him, so different from the expectations that most Jews would have had of their long-awaited Messiah.

There, at Caesarea of Phillipi, where a temple had been built to honor Ceasar, Jesus asks his disciples, "*Who do you say that I am*". St. Peter, whose faith foundation allows him to receive knowledge revealed by God the Father, responds; "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" Jesus appoints St. Peter as

³ Scott C. Layton, "The Steward in Ancient Israel: A Study of Hebrew (ʿāšer) ʿal-Habbayit in Its near Eastern Setting," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1990), 109:641, 109:649

the head of the Church and renews the place by saying that His Temple, the True Temple, will be built on Peter and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Arguably the most consequential words that follow St. Peter's declaration, are "rock" and "keys." "Rock" refers to the unshakable foundation he has given to his Church commonly understood as the divinely guaranteed guidance and authority of the papacy. "Keys" refer to faithfully teach the truth about what we ought to believe.⁴

In saying to St. Peter and all those present, "*upon this rock I will build my church*", Christ is announcing that His Church will be established through Peter [Cephas] the rock foundation. Peter, the rock, the foundation of the community which will carry the name and the authority of Jesus to the whole world, continuing to fulfill God's universal plan of salvation. On him, that is, Peter as a person and the divinely assisted faith of St. Peter, together with his Apostolic companions as the faithful communicators of Jesus' life and message, will be built the Church, the 'ekklesia' [ecclesia], the assembly of God's people. The keys, given to Peter, are a clear allusion to the royal steward, a continual position of authority, just as the papacy is an appointed continual position in Christ's Kingdom. For first-century Jewish disciples, Jesus's use of this terminology would have been immediately intelligible, especially given the history of Jewish monarchy and the prominence of rabbinic teaching in their religious life. The phrase carried the weight of established institutional authority—the power to determine what was permitted and forbidden, to discipline community members, and to render binding decisions that would be recognized as authoritative.⁵

This means Peter's power to bind and loose do not originate in his authority but is a recognition and implementation of what heaven has already determined. The future perfect tense construction suggests the disciples can only "ratify and obey" what God has already decreed. This means that what is authoritatively decided by St. Peter and his successors reflects what has already been declared in Heaven. Through this Gospel reading, we are given a clear understanding of the power bestowed on Peter and all his successors. As St. Ambrose of Milan is believed to have said: "*Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia; ubi Ecclesia, vita aeterna.*" "*Where Peter is, there is the Church; where the Church is, there is eternal life.*" This is why we call the Pope, Christ's Vicar on earth - the visible head of the Church. Considering the 'keys' and using the terms 'to bind and to loose', scripture is teaching us that Christ is investing Peter with the authority to interpret God's Word for the rest of the Church and how we should live - faith and morals.⁶ This not only displays the strength of the Church, but further, reveals the role of evangelization within the Church, which is where all of this must lead.

There is a third major consequence of Jesus' words. After talking about the rock and the keys, Jesus says that "*the gates of the netherworld will not prevail against his Church*". The rock and the keys tell us how the Church is structured, but this phrase tells us what the Church does: it overthrows the kingdom of the devil, breaking down the gates of evil that closed upon the world after original sin. The Church is neither a passive organization, nor a religious or social club; it is a divine person mystically embodied and has a mission. Being Catholic means being part of a spiritually unified body that is called and equipped by God to fight and conquer sin and evil. The Church's missionary activity is therefore not an optional addition to her identity. Since Christ entrusted the Apostles with the mission of preaching the Gospel to all, and we 'the Church' are sent to do the same.

⁴ Church's apostolic and Petrine structure: Christ entrusted Peter with a unique pastoral responsibility. Peter's ministry continues in the bishops of Rome. Communion with the successor of Peter is a visible sign of communion with the universal Church. The Church is not merely an invisible spiritual association; she is a visible, historical communion united in faith, sacraments, and apostolic leadership.

⁵ Stephen K. Ray, *Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church*, Modern Apologetics Library (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 269–271.

⁶ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 210.

The Church is missionary by her very nature, not merely because she organizes missions or undertakes additional apostolic projects. As the universal sacrament of salvation Christ established her as the visible sign and instrument through which salvation is proclaimed and communicated. Since Christ sent the Apostles to make disciples of all nations, the Church embodies a mission that is universal in scope.⁷

The mission of the Church is universal because every human person is called to salvation and holiness, that “*God offers every person a real possibility of salvation, in ways known fully to God.*”⁸ These days there exists within some missionary disciples, the idea that our mission is to ‘convert people to the Church’, a particular expression of ‘the Church’, or worse, ‘convert people’ to a particular liturgical expression of the Eucharistic Celebration. In truth, our mission is the mission of the Church, of Christ, for the salvation of the world. In our context, we take Christ to Campus, share faith, and bring the Campus to Christ. The Church, as universal sacrament of salvation is central us – the members of His mystical body, but it is secondary to encounter with Christ.

If missionary by her very nature, then every single one of us is a missionary, soldiers of Christ's Kingdom, carrying the saving light of truth into the world's myriad prisons of sin fashioned by the enemy and voluntarily embraced. Our weapons are not swords, guns, or bombs. We do not fight for an earthly kingdom. Our battle is against the original anti-authoritarian who was the cause of the original sin, if not it's true author. In fact, St. Cyril of Jerusalem called this former angel of light, “*the first author of sin*”.⁹ We battle against the spiritual tyranny of the same prideful selfish individualism that leads to our own and the suffering, injustice, and unhappiness of others. Our weapons must be spiritual. The better we know how to use our spiritual weapons, the greater our ability to meet the demands of our mission and, the more fulfilling our Christian adventure will be.

Four key Christian weapons are available to each of us all the time. Prayer is our communications system. The sacraments our supply line. If we learn to pray persistently and avail ourselves of the graces of the sacraments which perfect our nature, we will never lack inspiration, strength, and comfort in our Christian adventure. The third key is the living Word of God. If we read it and study it, always under the guidance of the Church, we are further transformed and spiritually enriched. Finally, the Great Commandment, “*Love one another as I have loved you*”.¹⁰ The first three keys being essential to the living the fourth. If that's not how we think of the Church, as a dynamic community of believers united around the Pope and engaged in sharing faith, today is a good day to begin cooperating with God who said, “*this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him*”.¹¹

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Cephas	The Aramaic name for Peter, meaning "rock," upon which Christ promised to build His Church.
Ecclesia (Ekklesia)	The assembly of God's people; the community that carries the name and authority of Jesus to the world.
Ecclesial Monophysitism	An error in ecclesiology that divinizes all aspects of the Church, failing to recognize human faults or defects.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992. § 849-852

⁸ White, Thomas Joseph. "Von Balthasar and Journet on the Universal Possibility of Salvation and the Twofold Will of God." In *Nova et Vetera, English Edition*, vol. 4, no. 3. Steubenville, OH: St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology, 2006.

⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem. "Catechetical Lectures - Lecture 2." In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 350.

¹⁰ John 15:12

¹¹ Matthew 17:5

Ecclesial Nestorianism	An error in ecclesiology that recognizes no inherent relationship between the divine and human elements of the Church.
Eliakim	The son of Hilkiah who was summoned by God to replace Shebna as the royal steward over the House of David.
Keys of the Kingdom	A symbol of delegated authority derived from the Davidic monarchy, representing the power to bind, loose, and govern the Church.
Petrine Ministry	The ongoing office of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, who watches over the unity of faith and love in the Church as the successor to St. Peter.
Royal Steward	A high-ranking official ("the one over the house") second only to the king, often acting as a "father" to the people.
Universal Sacrament of Salvation	A title for the Church signifying that she is the visible and historical instrument used by Christ to communicate salvation to all people.
Vicar of Christ	A title for the Pope as the visible head of the Church and Christ's representative on earth.