

CHAIR OF SAINT PETER – FEBRUARY 22



Do you have a problem with authority? It seems that many people do. It may not be outright rebellion, but at least skepticism. Do those in charge really have my best interests in mind? So much of what following a leader depends on is trusting that what is prescribed is really good for us. With so many examples of bad leadership, whether political, social, or religious, it is no wonder that many people, especially those stuck in a perpetual adolescence, are challenged when it comes to submitting to and respecting authority.

When we celebrate the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, I think it is possible for those challenges to respecting authority to surface in then faithful. While we celebrate the authority given to St. Peter as the “rock,” even that word can connect easily to the power that has been viciously wielded by those in authority across time. But it also connects easily with the image of Christ the head of the body, the Church, which is helpful for seeing this authority as something that is good for me.

Our first reading and Psalm draw from the image of a shepherd, reminding us again of Christ the Good Shepherd, the imitation of him that the presbyters were being called to, and St. Peter’s active role as the Supreme Shepherd of the Universal Church. The image of shepherd seems to soften the image of the authority being the head (not that, in truth, it needs softened). No one thinks of a shepherd as becoming a tyrant over the sheep. It would make it much easier to follow the shepherd who is willing to die for me than one who is merely doing his job.

In his role, the pope shares in the mystery of Christ as head and shepherd of the Church in a singular way. But these images are not enough to get the whole depiction of the authority of the Pope. If we stop there, we are left with an incomplete picture. I’m not just a member of a secular body of members of a group, and I’m not a sheep. In fact, there is something weird to me about a shepherd dying for a sheep. These images are good and necessary, but in a world without an abundance of good fathers, it becomes necessary to highlight the pope’s participation in the mystery of Christ the spouse of the Church as well.

First of all, ‘the “spousal” meaning of the body constitutes the fundamental component of human existence in the world’ (TOB 15:5). It is something that we are all capable of connecting to. Secondly, however, it is through the lens of the Sacrament of Marriage that we can come to a deeper understanding of how the pope’s authority is exercised. Pope St. John Paul II stated in TOB 78:5 that ‘There are many aspects and spheres of the complementarity between the vocation, in the evangelical sense, of those who “take wife and husband” (Lk 20:34) and those who consciously and voluntarily choose continence “for the kingdom of heaven.’ As well, ‘spousal love that finds its expression in continence “for the kingdom of heaven” must lead in its normal development to “fatherhood”...in the spiritual sense...in a way analogous to conjugal love. (TOB 78:5)’

The pope has laid down his life for the Bride of Christ in imitation of Jesus Christ. So many early popes did so in a definitive act of martyrdom, but St. Peter shows something of the steps along that way to such an act that are also spousal and fatherly. He teaches his presbyters, he challenges them to a better imitation of Jesus and to aspire to eternal life, and he exposes himself in vulnerability, risking criticism for the sake of leading the faithful deeper into the mystery of Christ’s redemption, much like those popes of our day have done. He is being a husband. He is being a father. We don’t always understand what our fathers’ teach us along the way, and we don’t always appreciate it in the moment, but if we follow it, we often see the fruit born in our lives. A bride doesn’t always see exactly where her husband is leading her, but St. Paul calls her to respect.

The pope doesn’t wield his authority as personal power but as one who has laid his life down for the Church in a gift of himself, believing that he is leading the Church along the mission set out for it by Jesus himself. Likewise, he sacrifices himself for his spiritual children teaching them the truth. It is particularly when the faithful receive this gift of self that the mystery of Christ in the pope is more fully revealed. It is all the more reason we need holy marriages, so that we may see more fully and more readily the pope’s spousal and fatherly care.



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