

The Importance Of The Papacy To Catholics

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Many tributes were paid to Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his death. One of the most striking was the editorial published in *The New York Times* on April 2, 2005. In the midst of stressing the pope's impact on world history, the editorial pointed out: "The papacy is a unique instrument of human governance. No other institution combines spiritual and political authority in quite the same way and with the same global reach, and no other can claim a continuous history stretching back to antiquity."

During my 45 years of priesthood, I have encountered many Catholics who do not understand, let alone appreciate the fundamental role that the pope plays in the makeup of the church. So while the life of John Paul II is still fresh in our memories, I would like to give a brief overview of what the papacy should mean for a believing Catholic.

Any community must have a core of set convictions. And if a community is to endure, someone in the community must have the authority to nurture, defend and transmit those convictions. In establishing his community (the church), Jesus gave that authority to his apostles, with Peter serving as their leader. As successors of the apostles, bishops inherit that same authority.

Let me preface what follows with a simple fact: the church is a living organism - "the mystical body of Christ, the entire People of God. That said, it must also be admitted that Jesus gave his church an organizational structure as well. Briefly:

He chose twelve apostles to be his intimate collaborators. For three years, he spent much of his time instructing them on the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. At the end of his earthly life, he charged them to spread the good news to the ends of the earth, making everyone his disciples.

Among the twelve, Simon Peter occupies a privileged place. Whenever the apostles are listed, Peter always appears first, just as Judas is always last. The first time he meets Peter, Jesus changes his name: "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called the Rock (*Kephas*)." For Jews, a change of name indicated a change of destiny (Abram to Abraham; Jacob to Israel, etc.). The enigma deepens when one considers that in the Old Testament, *rock* is a title that is almost exclusively God's: "Who else is a rock except our God?" (Ps. 18:31) What role then did Jesus have in mind for Simon Peter?

The answer is found in Matthew 16:18. After Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus says to him (*my paraphrase*): "You are *the Rock*, and on this rock I will build my Church. (*Not churches*). And the gates of hell will never destroy it (*It will last to the end of time*). I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven (*Keys signify authority*). Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven. And whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. (*Peter, whatever you decide in settling disputes about faith and morals, God will endorse it.*)

In John 10, Jesus proclaims, "I am the good shepherd." Later in John 21, he asks Simon Peter three times if he loves him. At each affirmation of love, Jesus commands him, "Feed my lambs...feed my sheep." Why is Simon singled out from the other disciples present, including the beloved John? Don't the sheep still belong to Jesus ("*my sheep*")? Then why doesn't he tend the sheep himself? In the context, the only possible explanation is that the supreme shepherd is about to return to his heavenly Father. But he will not leave his flock untended. In his absence, he appoints a visible, substitute shepherd who must rule over the entire flock with the same love that animated the supreme shepherd.

According to the early Christian writers, Peter established the church at Rome, thus becoming its first bishop. There he suffered martyrdom in Nero's circus and was buried nearby on the Vatican hill. The

bishops of Rome who succeeded Peter, likewise succeeded in his role as the supreme, *visible* shepherd of the universal church.

Perhaps no more eloquent testimony of this truth was ever given than that of St. Thomas More during his trial in July 1535. When he was convicted of high treason for refusing to take the oath of supremacy which acknowledged King Henry as supreme head of the church of England, More stood resolute before the court. In his defense, he declared that the oath was directly repugnant to the laws of God and his church. He protested that no temporal prince might take upon himself the supreme government of God's church, since it rightfully belonged
“to the See of Rome, a spiritual preeminence granted by the mouth of Our Savior himself, personally present upon earth, only to St. Peter and his successors, bishops of the same See.”