

First Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA

The Pope lost his temporal power on September 20, 1870, when forces of the Kingdom of Italy breached the walls of Rome and then occupied the Vatican the very next day. At first the Pope at the time resisted this development, and Pius IX decided he was a prisoner of the Vatican and refused even to set foot outside the Vatican walls for the rest of his life. This situation continued until the papacy of Pius XI, who negotiated a settlement in 1929 that created the Vatican City State. Because we are a Catholic Church we display that flag in the choir loft, and just this week we received the Vatican City flag that we will fly in front of St. Joseph's Church, alongside the American flag.

While the end of the pope's temporal power over a long swath of Italy was mourned by some, on the hundredth anniversary of Rome's fall, Pope Paul VI commemorated the day as providential. He considered the loss of temporal power a great blessing, having had time between the events of 1870 and 1970 to gain perspective.

The proper perspective is that articulated by Jesus when Satan took Him high up to show our Lord all the kingdoms of the earth, offering Jesus dominion over them if only He would worship a creature, the devil, rather than the Creator, our heavenly Father. Jesus told our adversary, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" Jesus did not succumb to this temptation because His ministry was based on service to God and not power over His fellow human beings.

This is an important lesson for us to remember as we enter the Holy Season of Lent, during which we anticipate we will receive a new Pope to govern the Church. This lesson, that ministry for Christians is based on service and not on power, is what motivated our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to abdicate the Throne of St. Peter, beginning February 28th. Not only is the Pope the Vicar of Christ, he is also called the Servant of the Servants of God.

Because it is his duty and calling to serve the servants, the Pope said as recently as last summer that it would be his duty to resign if he were unable to perform the tasks integral to the office of the papacy. Now that Benedict has resigned, we can see that he was motivated to do so out of his great love for the people Jesus has trusted him to serve.

The Pope's loss of temporal power in 1870 has allowed him today to concentrate on the spiritual needs of the 1.2 billion Catholics under his care. Sure, he still governs less than a square mile of territory in and outside the walls of Rome, but we can never confuse his primary role now as a shepherd of souls.

This conception that the Pope has now for himself can be an example to us when we are tempted to desire the power that Satan says he can give us. There are many ways that each of us imagines we could improve the world, if only we had the power to do it. By this we mean of course that we desire the power to coerce others into righteousness. However, not having this power helps us to recognize that we have a power even more significant: the power to persuade by virtue of love.

Since the Church lacks temporal power in almost every place on earth, she can concentrate her energies on the conversion of souls to the Truth of the Gospel. The election of a new pope does not have to do with power politics, but, by the example of our current Holy Father, it does have to do with what is truly best for the people of God.

Herein we see the major misapprehension as the news media tries to grapple with the transition we will soon see take place. Media types basically take the devil at his word and assume that the papacy has to do with power. They wonder whether the next pope will exercise his power to change this doctrine or that discipline, never taking into account the reality that the pope can only do what God has given him the authority to do, to wash his disciples' feet, in emulation of our Lord's example at the Last Supper. The Holy See is not a democracy, but neither is the Holy Father a dictator intent to impose his will upon the Church he oversees. Rather, like Jesus, the pope is both a shepherd and a fisherman, providing for and protecting the flock, even as he casts wide the net to draw more people into communion with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

This is the model for us and the way we will best help our secular neighbors to understand the nature of the Church. We are not tempted to exercise temporal power over our neighbors because coercion can only go so far. We may be able to get people to behave a certain way for a time because they fear us, but love's reward will be for long-lasting. If then obedience is based on love out of gratitude they have for all they have received at God's hand, then they will be willing to lay down their lives in service to our Lord.

Thus, if we are to mourn any of the developments of the past week, even of the past 150 years, we can only mourn that the Church has not persuaded more people of the Truth of her claims. We can't mourn that she has so little temporal power when her spiritual power is so immense. Count all the media outlets opining upon the outcome of the next election in Rome, and then consider how all the world waits with baited breath to hear what Holy Mother Church has to say. The world is listening, and not just as we approach the conclave. The world is listening because we have the words of life. We must then make sure that when we speak, we say only what accords with the Lord's will, the Lord's will that we be our neighbors' servants, not their masters, as our Holy Father so ably demonstrated in the face of the adversary's temptation to embrace power at the expense of love.