

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

August 27, 2017

**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of**

**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at**

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore St.

Scranton, PA 18508

Matthew 16:13-20

The first truth that must be emphasized upon hearing today's Gospel is that the Church is called to be on the offensive, storming the gates of hell. Referring to Peter, Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The devil and his angels are those who have built a fortress, and it is the Catholic Church that has been created by God Himself to tear down those walls. We are the besieging army, not the ones being besieged; so we must be careful not to assume a defensive posture in relation to the true enemy.

We must see ourselves as freeing from the shackles of their sin those who are enslaved by Satan. Satan wants to keep them in their misery, to preserve what he has stolen; and it is our duty to beat past his defenses and reach those poor sinners, with the fullness of truth and the Good News of life in Jesus Christ. We are the force whose territory is growing, those who have been promised final victory; so whatever setbacks we suffer in the battle cannot lead us to retreat and build a fortress akin to the one we're working to destroy.

I had lunch yesterday with a man I hadn't seen in sixteen years, someone who had only known me when I was Episcopalian. He is a cradle Catholic, and his experience of the Church in his lifetime has been one of ceding territory to the world. From his perspective people are leaving the Church, parishes are closing, and the priests he has ministering to him in his parish are foreigners, because his diocese is experiencing such an acute vocations crisis. Naturally, he was interested to hear from someone who had joined the Church and could share stories of growth and vitality.

We talked for a long time, and he pressed me for a formula to explain the difference between our diocese and the one in which he resides. I told him that what distinguishes the faithful of the Ordinariate is that they are not ashamed of the Catechism. They are not put on the defensive by what the Church teaches, but instead want to share it because it is what is best for mankind, body and soul. We are able to win converts to the Faith because we do not apologize for the unpopular elements of Catholic faith and morals. Rather, we are grateful for them, and we want to explain the Truth to those we encounter. The faithful of the Ordinariate have been successful precisely because we are not on the defensive.

This brings me to the second truth from today's Gospel we are called to emphasize in the current climate. St. Peter was given his authority from God, an authority that the successors of St. Peter also possess. But Jesus did not make St. Peter into God. His authority to bind and loose is limited to his role as governor and legislator, and it does not extend into the realm of faith and morals. The pope can no more change doctrine than he can make pigs fly; and this was articulated beautifully in a passage written by Blessed Paul VI in 1968.

I have told you before that the most important thing written in the entire twentieth century was the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. And in the past, I have focused upon what the Holy Father taught about contraception and its consequences. But today I am going to read a passage from this divine work that addresses the issue of authority, and specifically papal authority. From paragraph 18: "[The Church] does not ... cease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law, both natural and evangelical. Of such laws the Church was not the author, nor consequently can she be their arbiter; she is only their depository and their

interpreter, without ever being able to declare to be licit that which is not so by reason of its intimate and unchangeable opposition to the true good of man.”

St. Peter was not given the authority to change an immutable law, so his successors in the Petrine office must observe this manner of exercising that authority, as well. Those who imagine the Holy Father can change the Church’s teaching on faith and morals fail to understand who the successor of St. Peter is and what exactly he does. Even to get to this point in a discussion is to reach the level of absurdity, for to lament the Catechism is to cede that the world is right and that the Church must alter her posture from offense to defense. In fact, we have nothing to defend, only good to proclaim; and we must insist instead that our adversaries defend the wreckage that ensues when the Church’s immemorial teaching is shunted to the side and ignored. Such wreckage is indefensible; so the louder and the more articulately we proclaim the Faith once handed down to the saints, the more adherents we will win. The history and experience of our parish is evidence of this reality.

These are important issues to raise, particularly when the ambiguity of so many of the Holy Father’s public statements lead to interpretations totally inconsistent with the Church’s teaching. Even if our adversaries believe something untrue about the Petrine office and the pope’s authority, we must remain confident in what the words of today’s Gospel actually mean.

But the Holy Father’s ham-fisted public statements are less concerning than the pressure about to be extended on him from quarters both inside and outside of the Church, pressure to which no pope has ever succumbed, magnificently illustrated in our own lifetime by Blessed Paul VI.

The fiftieth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* is coming next year on July 25th, and voices have already been raised, quite loudly, that Pope Francis should do what Blessed Paul VI famously refused to do: change the Church’s teaching on contraception. What I quoted before shows that Pope Francis can do no such thing, even if he were so inclined; so just quote for your adversaries paragraph 18 of *Humanae Vitae*. Faith and morals do not change, regardless of who sits upon the throne of St. Peter.

Such insistence can sound stifling to a people accustomed to changing the truth, so they imagine, as often as they can get the courts or enough of their fellow citizens to agree to such change. Therefore, it’s helpful to remember that Blessed Paul VI was not only a theological genius, who was able to forewarn us of the evils we must now endure; he was also a pastor. So, with paragraph 18, have handy with you paragraph 19 of *Humanae Vitae*: “The Church, in fact, cannot have a different conduct toward men than that of the Redeemer. She knows their weaknesses, has compassion on the crowd, receives sinners; but she cannot renounce the teaching of the law which is, in reality, that law proper to a human life restored to its original truth and conducted by the spirit of God.” The Church’s project is the restoration of man, that by God’s grace he may return to his state in the Garden of Eden.

May the prayers of Blessed Paul VI bring more people to faith in the Petrine office as it was instituted by Jesus Himself; and may our own prayers help Pope Francis to follow the example of every saintly pope, from Peter to John Paul II, so he may lead us in our charge as we storm the gates of hell.