

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Year A  
August 27, 2017 (8:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m.)  
Readings: Isaiah 22: 19-23; Romans 11: 33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

*"The Power of the Keys"*

Today's Gospel could easily be categorized as one of the most familiar and most central for Catholics in the New Testament. The words of Jesus in this passage grace (in Latin) the ceiling of the beautiful Chapel of St. Peter, the first of the side chapels completed following the opening of this Cathedral.

In our first reading from Isaiah, authority was symbolized by a robe, sash and key. Keys have been discovered in the ruins of Nineveh, in ancient Assyria. The symbolism of keys easily carries over into the secular world, in the life of families and the workplace, but with technology, that too is rapidly changing. I can vividly recall when I received my own house key, for the rare instance when Mom would not be home after school.

Every teenager recalls the first time being handed the car keys, and what an incredible feeling of power comes with it, but equally a sense of responsibility. Perhaps today it is a keypad code or a fob.

At Noon on January 20<sup>th</sup> following an election, a new president takes office and the outgoing loses all legal authority and most privileges of the office. The same happened to Pope Benedict XVI precisely at 8:00 p.m. on February 28, 2013 when he resigned, and the list goes on. It is almost surreal, making us wonder just in what or in whom does authority really reside?

Authority makes little sense apart from service and responsibility. How many dictators did St. John Paul II encounter during his many apostolic visits? Of course, he outlasted many of them! True and authentic authority is much deeper than legal authority, which can vanish quickly, as history has shown.

Today I invite you to consider looking at authority from a different perspective. Consider the power of binding and loosing mentioned in the Scriptures. Besides the specific power given to St. Peter in this morning's passage, St. Augustine wrote convincingly of the power also exercised by the faithful laity to bind and loose in a derivative sense. There is a real authority in the lives of the faithful. This is seen in the manner in which parents exercise their authority.

In one of his sermons Augustine stated emphatically: "You bind; you also loose."<sup>1</sup> Yes, Jesus entrusted the keys to Peter alone in today's passage from Matthew 16. At the same time, Peter also represents the whole Church. That Church is the Body of Christ, of which you are all constitutive members. In Matthew 18:18, Jesus addresses the disciples in the plural—"you (pl). bind and loose." In another sermon, Augustine is quite blunt: "The holy Church is what we are."<sup>2</sup>

The faithful laity in their own way share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. What Vatican II would formally teach centuries later, Augustine already hinted at in his sermons. There is an ecclesial dimension to fraternal correction and reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> Your prayers for each other, including your prayers for those who have separated themselves from God's commandments and the truth— these prayers are an exercise of the priesthood of the faithful. While different in kind and not just degree from the ministerial priesthood, it is a true participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The lay faithful have much to say about how authority and reconciliation is exercised in our families, in our communities, in our nation. I recall the days when the parents in our neighborhood

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, Sermon # 229N.2

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, Sermon 213,8 *Sancta Ecclesia nos sumus*

<sup>3</sup> See Rev. Joseph Carola's doctoral dissertation, "Augustine of Hippo: The Role of the Laity in Ecclesial Reconciliation, page. 113.

were largely on the same page. You went to one kid's house, and you knew the rules that were at play. There was no guessing game. It was understood precisely because it was expected of us.

Our relation to social and political authority is rooted in our own more fundamental relation to our parents, from whom we first learned the proper understanding of authority. Their authority is not absolute, but in fact derives from God, our Creator and Father, whose authority is absolute and unchangeable.

Each of us is both subject to authority and at the same time, has been given power from God to witness to the ends of the earth, to gather together under the headship of Christ. Members of a family all have equal dignity, yet not equal authority, a fact understood by parents who have willingly accepted the great responsibility to raise a family in light of the truth. The same applies in the Church.

We live in a society in which we must tolerate the wheat and the chaff, and on our worst days, perhaps we behaved much more like the chaff than the wheat. But collectively, we can make a difference. The real rebirth of this local Church, I am convinced, is coming through the witness of the lay faithful who are demanding more of themselves, their priests, their parishes and thus the Church.

May this powerful symbol of the keys be for each of us a reminder of our union with Catholics all over the world and let us daily pray for our Holy Father, that the Lord may bless and guide him as he leads us in the ways of faith. And may we do our part, according to our state in life, to be vessels of reconciliation and see authority as a true exercise of loving service to God and to one another.