

Standing in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, underneath the massive dome designed by Michelangelo, encircling the base of the dome is a mosaic of words, blue letters on a gold background, the words of our Lord from the last two verses of today's Gospel in Latin, translated, **"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."** Several stories below that dome are what is held to be the bones of St. Peter.

For the Roman Catholic Church, this passage tells you where to find the Church that our Lord Jesus speaks of. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read,

The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the 'rock' of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. . . . This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope. The Pope, the Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, 'is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of unity both of the bishops and the whole company of the faithful.' 'For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.'

So, according to Roman Catholic teaching, you find the Church where you find Peter and those who are his successors. That is the foundation, the authority, upon which the Church is built.

And yet Peter himself writes just a chapter after today's epistle, describing the church as a building, listen to the words of First Peter chapter 2:

As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.' So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense'" (vv. 4 – 8).

Peter speaks to the Church, to Christians, as those built upon the foundation, the stone laid in Zion by the Father, and that stone is not Peter. By the passages Peter cites, he makes this clear. Not just here, but also in his confession before the Sanhedrin in today's first reading. The stone rejected by the builders that is the cornerstone is Jesus Christ Himself. That is the rock. And so Peter confesses to the leaders of Israel, not that salvation is found only in the visible joining under himself, under Peter, but in the name of Jesus, the one whom Peter so beautifully and by the inspiration of God recognized as the Christ, the Son of God.

It is this confession that is the foundation of the Church. It is wherever the confession of Jesus as the Christ the Son of God sounds forth, it is there that you find Christians. Those who confess Jesus as the Christ are to seek out the Church, the visible gathering where this confession is made. It is the solemn

duty and obligation of every Christian to be a part of the flock, where the sheep gather around the Shepherd. So where does that happen?

Not simply where there is some connection to Peter in his person, or a supposed long lineage of bishops who can trace the occupant of their chair all the way to one of the Twelve. The Church is founded upon and identified by where God reveals to men who Jesus of Nazareth is. It is by God's creation and doing through His Word, as the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies you and all believers. That is where the Church is.

And God be praised that despite whatever divisions there are in visible Christendom, His Word, this truth, this simple, saving confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God sounds forth as it is confessed by countless lips, believed in innumerable hearts, sometimes in the most surprising of places, places where we have no idea how the Word of God might possibly be present and at work there.

Rome is wrong. Rome identifies the Church of Christ far too narrowly with a visible institution that speaks beyond what the Word of God says, indeed, contrary to it on several occasions. Yet God be praised that His Word is still at work there. There are Christians in the fellowship of the pope's church. And so also in any visible gathering around God's Word of those baptized in His name, given the gift of the Holy Spirit, faith, and the forgiveness of sins.

And yet at the same time, because it is this confession, faith in this Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah, the Savior of the world apart from whom there is no salvation, every Christian is to seek out not simply where that confession is made, as though nothing else that is taught matters, but where all the teaching, whatever is confessed, will serve that saving faith.

The Bible is God's Word. His Word is truth. If something is taught and believed that is not taught in the Bible, it is a lie. Lies do not save. No person is saved because they believe things that are false. They are saved in spite of that. They are saved because God preserves saving faith in them despite false beliefs.

But lies, false teaching, can undermine salvation. That is why even as we rejoice that there is on this earth a gathering of all believing hearts around the saving name and confession of Jesus, we also must recognize false teaching where it is present, and mark and avoid it. Because that false teaching can, eventually, at some point, cause saving faith to be lost.

There are visible gatherings of Christians, denominations, confessions, that teach that our works are just as necessary to our salvation as faith in Jesus. That quite obviously, quite quickly, can send people to hell. Directing a dying Christian to trust in his own merits, his own good works, is a wicked thing. Or to fix one's hopes on Mary and the saints for help, crying out to them in life's last hour rather than Christ.

But so also directing a Christian to trust in his decision, his acceptance of Jesus, or to turn Christians away from Christ's own institution of Baptism as unnecessary, are perilous. Or across the board of any denomination, to simply think that having one's name on a congregation's role is the same as being found written in the Book of Life, and as long as I have my name somewhere, maybe drop in from time to time and put a \$20 in the plate, is sufficient.

We care about the teaching of the faith in all its articles, in the pure confession of all of saving doctrine, because in the end it all serves this simple, saving confession: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.