

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity  
August 27, 2017

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One fine day in 1897 Pope Leo XIII was reading a letter from the Anglican archbishops of Canterbury and York. The letter was in reply to the Papal Bull *Apostolicae Curae*. The Holy Father read the letter carefully. Then he took off his eyeglasses, rubbed his eyes, and said to his secretary “they use the word catholic, but *they don't mean what we mean by catholic!*”

So it goes. When I bring the Blessed Sacrament to a parish family living in Dorchester I pass a church with a lengthy title mounted proudly on the side of the building. “We are a Traditional, Scriptural, Church and NOT a new church, but are the same Church set forth by Jesus the Christ, nurtured and continued by the Apostles, and ever kept alive by God the Holy Spirit.”

Protestant groups have a tough sell. The problem is that “the same Church set forth by Jesus the Christ” is self-evidently in communion with Peter. So how is it possible to be part of the one true church and not be in communion with Peter’s successors? That thought likely prompted Leo XIII’s question.

Why does Peter matter so much? The answer is because without Peter it is less than Christianity. *Peter is there*. You may use affirmations, qualifiers, or disclaimers. But you have to explain Peter. The word **Catholic** comes from *katá ὅλον* “according to wholeness. So today’s gospel reminds Catholics about the affirmations of Holy Scripture.

It would be hard to believe that after His Ascension into Heaven our Lord Jesus simply left everything to chance! Yes indeed, Christ promised the Holy Spirit to guide and guard and lead us into all truth. But how are we to know? Don’t we deserve the truth? What guarantee is there that Christ’s Church would not stray from the straight and narrow path He described as leading to eternal life? It is so easy to stray! One recent Anglican bishop in Massachusetts declared “It’s our church; we’ll do what we want with it.” And a recent Episcopal Church presiding bishop declared “We can contradict the scriptures because we have the Holy Spirit.” Once again remember Pope Leo’s remark, “They use the word catholic but they do not mean what we mean by catholic.”

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How are we to know? The answer is the unity of the Church was secured against error by one man with one voice. The Church is one because Christ is one. And the single, clear, voice of the Church must continue to be that of a particular man whose voice could be identified with the authority of Christ Himself.

This would all be speculation if we were not able to identify this particular man. But he is there in the pages of the New Testament. There is one apostle whose name occurs some sixty times in the four gospels (the runner up is mentioned twenty-five times.) This same apostle is invariably the spokesman for the rest; he always takes the initiative in a crisis; he alone is set apart by Our Lord Jesus as holding a unique position. And then after the Lord's Ascension into Heaven and the Day of Pentecost, this same man, Simon Peter, figured so prominently that the first twelve chapters of *The Acts of the Apostles* have been often called "The Acts of Peter." Peter is everywhere taking the lead, everywhere the hero, appealed to, or challenged to change his view. He is first to speak at the Council of Jerusalem, and his name is already regarded as a watchword in far-away Corinth.

Today's Gospel forms just one part of that evidence. And it is hard to image St Matthew inserting this passage into his gospel if in fact it was not already the established belief of the Church. Matthew was not *inventing* or *promoting* Peter! The gospel was stating what everyone knew to be true.

On a recent Sunday we had a gospel passage showing us Peter trying to walk on water and nearly drowning. Nearly drowning is the part we remember and conclude "foolish Peter." We tend to forget that Christ had said to Peter, "Come." And what followed brought from Peter's heart to his voice those wonderful words "Lord save me." Those are words which should never be very far from any disciple's lips! The Son of God knew what He was doing. Blessed Jesus does not make mistakes, not with Peter, and not with you and me. And in the end it will be as He says.

So if people are looking for a church they will find many. But if they are looking for *The Church*, they will only find one, for only one contains the successor of Peter.