

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter  
February 23, 2020

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Today we observe the Solemnity of the Chair of Saint Peter in Rome. And we celebrate the happy anniversary that ten years ago this feast was chosen as the patronal name day of the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St Peter.

The chair of St Peter refers not to any particular occupant of a piece of furniture! It refers to the teaching office of the Bishop of Rome throughout history. This teaching office is a sign of the unity of the Church Both the *sign* and the *unity* come down the ages.

When Christians began to separate from the Church founded by Christ, those breaking with Peter's successors saw him as a stumbling block for reunion. When Catholics dialogue with Orthodox or Protestants alike, the agenda includes something called "the problem of authority." And today when German bishops use the buzz word "synodality" it all boils down to the same thing. Unpack the polite language and the concern is: "what to do with the pope." Separated Orthodox Christians see the pope and his successors as first among equals, the bishop who presides when bishops gather. He is the man who wields the gavel at meetings. Sadly, some Orthodox and many Protestants use invective rather than polite language, calling the Holy Father the incarnation of "the whore of Babylon." But it is not how Orthodox or Protestants or even Catholic bishops see Peter but how Jesus Christ sees Peter that is paramount.

We must keep our eye on the fact Christ did not leave us a book, either the Bible or an operation manual. He left us His Church. Much of the four gospels reveal the years Jesus devoted to the teaching and training of the twelve apostles. It only makes sense to conclude the Lord did this because truth is obtainable, and these men were then authorized and deputed by Him to preach it. And Scripture also records the fact Peter was especially given the work of caring for *all* the apostles.

Separated Christians acknowledge those facts, but then object that the Papacy of today is not the same as in the early years, an office with primitive limits. But if you follow that argument, who decides when the Church went wrong? Was it after the Council of Chalcedon in 451? Some eastern Christians want to go back to 431, or the Council of Nicaea in 325. In more modern times some see the First Vatican

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Council as the breaking point, while others refer to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s as the problem. All of this flies in the face of the prayer of our Lord Jesus to the Father “that they all may be one.” *John 17:21* And the Father’s answer was not “NO” or “maybe later” or “okay, until 451AD.”

The objection that the Papacy of today does not follow the original blueprint also leaves Pentecost on the cutting room floor. The Lord Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit “to guide you into all truth.” *John 16:13* Leading the Church into all truth included the central dogma of our faith. There is no proof of the Holy Trinity in the Epistle of St James. But we do not stop with the Epistle to St James! The most fundamental dogma of Christianity rests ultimately on the teaching of the Catholic Church in the post-apostolic age *and today*. I say *today* because it is no coincidence nearly all Protestant leaders in Germany and the Netherlands, and perhaps even a majority of Catholics, make a case *against* the Holy Trinity. In the Catholic Church everything fits together or falls apart together. We simply refuse to say the Catholic Church was “more guided” by the Holy Spirit from Pentecost to the year 451 than she is today!

Yes, there have been bad popes. Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI, 1492-1503) probably goes to the top of the list. Today however we give thanks for the most recent Holy Fathers. Pope St Paul VI recognized the gifts separated Christians bring to the Church. St John Paul II gave us the pastoral provision, and Pope Benedict XVI, the ordinariates. Pope Francis gave us Bishop Lopes. We give thanks that the occupant of the Chair of St Peter is not a stand in for one who is absent, but the visible sign of the presence of Christ with His people, yesterday, today, and always.

You and I learned in catechism each sacrament has both an outward sign and an inward grace. So too, the Church has a visible head, a vicar we can see, who is inseparable from Christ’s eternal presence in His mystical Body which is the mostly invisible Church but made visible in the church militant for our sake. On the Feast of the Chair of St Peter we rejoice and take comfort in the fact we have ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE CHURCH.