

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter
February 22, 2021

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The travel guides should advise tourists visiting Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome to bring binoculars. So many of the things you want to see are at a vast distance. One of those is the Chair of St Peter.

Pope Alexander VII (1599-1667) wanted to place the Chair on permanent view. So he went to the renowned sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) to refurbish the old oaken chair, riddled as it was by age, and held together by various metal plates and other fasteners. Apart from the Wood of the Cross and the *Sudarium*, this piece of dilapidated furniture was the most famous surviving relic in Christendom.

Bernini enclosed the wooden Chair in bronze and overlaid it with gold. The bronze relief on the back rest of the Chair shows Our Lord Jesus giving the keys to St Peter. This is where the viewer needs binoculars. Bernini placed the Chair where you can't see it up close. That is because it is elevated beyond the *baldacchino* which stands over the high altar. And the bronzed chair seems to be airborne, surrounded by four fifteen-foot-high figures of Saints: Ambrose, Athanasius on the left, and Augustine and John Chrysostom on the right. The message here is that from the Chair the Holy Father presides over the whole Christian people east and west.

These saints do not appear to be holding up the chair. Rather, they are simply touching it with palms down. This creates the impression the chair is light weight, or as if there is a power in the Chair *flowing into* the four great doctors of the Church. This is Bernini's take on the Feast we observe today. This day is not focused ultimately upon the Chair, but upon the *Holy Spirit-giving authority* which makes this Chair unlike any other piece of furniture. The authority of Jesus Christ Himself occupies the Chair, regardless of the name of the pope who is His vicar at that time.

The word **see** is used to describe a bishop's diocese. The word comes from **seat**, the bishop's teaching chair, from which he instructs the people. The man who sits in the See of Peter is Bishop of Rome. This is the principle see of the Church, guided and guarded by the same Holy Ghost Who descended upon Our Blessed

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Lord at His Baptism and Who was breathed upon the apostles by Our Lord at Easter. The Chair of St Peter at Rome is a visible link in the salvation history of God's people.