

Homily for August 22, 1999
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 22:19-23
Romans 11:33-36
Matthew 16:13-20

We share a faith enhanced by the presence of the Pope.

Some years ago when psychological screening was first introduced as part of the selection process for candidates of the priesthood, cynics wondered how Jesus' apostles would have fared on those tests. Eleven of the twelve would probably have failed and been rejected.

The sons of Zebedee would have been classified as "mama's boys" who could not stand on their own two feet. Peter would have been a real risk for he had an unstable personality, needed to show-off in front of others and covered up his own limitations by lying. Only one would have gotten high marks. Judas Iscariot's good business sense was a sure sign that he had a promising future. But God's ways of looking at people are surely not our ways. And Jesus' words to Peter, "You are rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it" – this text, understood both in terms of Papal primacy and the Church's durability, surely challenges the faith of the contemporary Catholic.

But when has it not been so? What kind of "rock" was Peter when only moments after his great profession, "You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God," Jesus would say, "Get behind me, you have the

thoughts of Satan.?" That was only the beginning of Peter's reign, through braggadocio, denials, betrayals, reconciliations, victories, later struggles with Paul, and disappointments with his people.

As for Peter's ark, that church, our church, how often it neared disaster: in the shadow of imperial armies, under threats of martyrdom and flame, in the depths of dark ages, infidelities of monks, scandals of popes, in the great wounds of schism, the slaughter of religious wars, the unraveling of the priesthood, the selling of bishoprics, the seductions of fascism, Communism, and capitalism.

Yet doom was not our destiny. Through all of history's storms, despite infidelities, diminishments, and failure, the Church has carried in its womb, to be born over and over again in scripture and the Eucharist, the Christ who asks of us, whether pope or peasant, "Who do you say I am?"

Jesus did not commission Peter or any of us to build the Church. Christ himself was the original builder, and he continues to build up his Church through the power of the Spirit. Protecting the church from evil and assuring the powers of darkness do not prevail was God's work in the beginning and continues to be God's work today. The leaders and other ministers in the Church, like Peter, are simply God's instruments.

They are not meant to draw people to themselves but are to be transparent so they draw people to Christ.

Each time a person enters the floor of the Chancery of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati – where the Archbishop has his office, you are greeted by a photograph of the Pope – and it’s always a recent photograph – it changes as the Pope has changed over the many years of his reign. Now he’s a bit bent over – but there he is, a sign that even in weakness and old age, one who serves is in our midst.

“And who do you say I am,” – the question put to every pope and to each of us – how do we answer today? In his novel entitled *The Silence*, the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo writes about an early Spanish Jesuit missionary who is captured by the Japanese authorities who are trying to get him to renounce his faith and step on an icon of Christ. They have already crucified hundreds of Christians, but they know they can demoralize the flock if the shepherd defects. The idealistic Jesuit is ready and eager to face torture and death rather than scandalize his flock. But his Machiavellian inquisitor tortures other Christians instead. He will stop when the Jesuit renounces his faith.

Faced with this dilemma, the Jesuit contemplates the face of Christ in the icon. It is not a beautiful face. It is the face of the suffering Christ whom the Jesuit had been willing to follow to Calvary. After much soul-searching, the Jesuit finally hears the icon speak. Christ says, “Step on me, for this is why I came.” This Christ did not come to be worshiped or even followed but to suffer with us and for us. He wants to be more than an icon; he wants to be Savior and friend.

We share a faith enhanced by the
presence of the Pope.