

“That as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them.”

Acts 5:15

All cardinals are appointed to their office – to their positions of authority – by the pope.

When a pope dies, those cardinals who are in charge of dioceses, like Cardinal Vincent Nichols who is in charge of the diocese of Westminster, carry on in charge of their dioceses. But those cardinals who run the different departments in the Vatican all lose their jobs, and all the jobs are vacant until the new pope makes new appointments. This is exactly what has happened in the Church at the moment.

But there are a couple of exceptions. One is the Carmerlengo of the Holy Roman Church. The Carmerlengo is a sort of cross between a Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. His job is look after the running of the Vatican on a day to day basis, and when there is no pope the Cardinal Carmerlengo is in charge. He is the one you have seen on the news lately, Cardinal Kevin Farrell. He is not a sort of deputy pope. He does not have the authority and power of the pope. He just administers the organization of daily events.

Another exception, which is much more important – but which, funnily enough, never gets mentioned in the news media – is the Cardinal who holds the post of Major Penitentiary. Now the job of the Major Penitentiary is to oversee all matters relating to the Sacrament of Confession and the forgiveness of sins, including, for example, the imposition or lifting of suspensions and excommunications, the granting of indulgences, the dispensation of impediments that would otherwise mean certain people couldn't receive the sacraments, and so forth. The point is that the job of forgiving sins is the single most important work of the Catholic Church. This is why the Catholic Church was founded by Our Lord in the first place. In a very real sense, the Catholic Church has no other function than to forgive sins and

draw people back into friendship with God. And whilst almost everything else regarding the running of the Church is suspended with the death of a pope, this is the one job that can never be interrupted. The forgiveness of sins is simply too important. And although this is the one job that continues even while we wait for a new pope to be elected, nonetheless the power to forgive sins was entrusted, chiefly, to St Peter as part of the Power of the Keys by which whatever St Peter binds on earth is considered bound in heaven and whatever he looses on earth is considered loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19).

In today's First Reading we hear how people gathered along the roadside in the hope that at least St Peter's shadow might fall on them. Neither they in the Acts of the Apostles nor we in the twenty-first century pretend that St Peter is God! Even so, the people in Jerusalem recognized what we also recognize, namely that St Peter has a unique role even among the Twelve Apostles, and that unique role applies to each and every one of St Peter's successors whom, today, we call the Pope.

The job of the Catholic Church is threefold: She must teach God's people, She must sanctify God's people (chiefly through the grace of the Sacraments), and She must govern God's people and lead them to heaven.

The job of the pope is exactly the same. As the Vicar of Christ, as the one appointed by Our Lord Himself to oversee the work down the ages that Christ began whilst He still walked upon the earth, the pope – or father figure – has the task of exercising *full*, *supreme*, and *universal* authority over the threefold work of the Church. In a very real sense, and for the purposes of overseeing the Church's mission to teach, to sanctify, and to govern God's people, the pope stands in the place of Christ... not to *replace* Christ, but to exercise authority on a day-to-day basis and to ensure that the work Christ began is continued down the years.

We know that Our Lord often healed the sick and forgave sins at the same time, and this was because all infirmities of mind and body are the result of sin and of our inhabiting a sin-damaged nature. So we should not be surprised that in the readings the Church has given us just one week after the feast of Christ's triumph over sin and death we find St Peter healing the sick on the one hand and Christ giving to His Apostles the power to forgive sins on the other.

And this is what we look to the pope for: this is why, like the people in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, all Catholics around the world have a natural affection for St Peter and his successors. The pope is, for us, a Christ-like father figure whose responsibility is to lead us all to heaven. And when a pope dies, we mourn his loss, and we pray for him that he may now be rewarded for his labours in God's vineyard. But we also pray that God may raise up for us a holy and worthy successor who will continue in our day the work begun by Christ so long ago.

*O God, who in Thy transcendent providence
was pleased to cause Thy servant Francis to be numbered among the supreme pontiffs,
we pray Thee to admit him, who on earth was vicar of Thy only-begotten Son,
into the company of holy pontiffs now and for evermore:
through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.*