

**“Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”
Mt 16:18**

Today is the first feast of Ss Peter & Paul for our new Pope Leo, and is a milestone in his ministry as Christ’s Vicar on earth because, in many ways, today is the feast of the papacy. It marks several things, but chiefly it celebrates the occasion when Our Lord first gave to His Church the beautiful gift of the papacy.

Historically, the papacy has sometimes been seen as something controversial, both politically and theologically. Yet, in a way, this should not surprise us. After all, Our Lord’s message of salvation is controversial: the teachings of the Catholic Faith make demands of us with which not everyone is happy. Many today consider that it is not for someone else to tell them how to behave. They have their own experiences and informed points of view which are sufficient to guide them through life, they claim. It has always been so, from the time of Adam onwards. However, the whole point of the Catholic Church and Her teachings is to show us the path to heaven. If you want your air fryer to cook your lunch for you, then you have to use it in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions. If you want your iPhone or your iPad to do what you want it to do, you have to comply with their in-built systems. The same is true of human nature. Ultimately, we were created to be happy with God for ever in heaven. If we would get to heaven, then we need to follow the Maker’s original plan.

The job of the Pope is to continue the work that Our Lord began on earth two thousand years ago, and to *teach* us how to get to heaven, *sanctify* us by giving us God’s grace through prayer and the Sacraments, and *govern* our lives by helping us to stay on the right path in accordance with our Maker’s instructions.

Presumably, once He had accomplished His work on earth Our Lord could have simply abandoned us and left us to find our own way to heaven: ‘I’ve done my bit, now it’s up to

you!’ But that, of course, is not the way of a merciful God who wills that as many of us get to heaven as possible.

Today also marks another notable occasion. We don’t always appreciate just how remarkable a First Communion Day is in a parish. But today, three of our children will receive the Body of Christ in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar for the very first time. On what is the most important day of their lives since their Baptism, these three children will receive the sanctifying grace of God’s presence into their souls, and the One who forgives us our sins will take up His dwelling place in their hearts. He will become for them, in a unique way, their Shepherd and their King, their Saviour and their God. He will wrap His arms around them to keep them safe from the harm of sin, He will guide them through this life, and lead them towards the life to come.

Today’s feast of Ss Peter & Paul on the one hand, and our parish First Holy Communion Day on the other, are intimately connected because it is only through the teaching authority of the Church, under the leadership of Christ’s own deputy, the Pope, that we even know what the Blessed Sacrament is or sanctifying grace is, or about the proper way to live lives of Christian virtue. It is only through Christ’s Church, and under the guiding hand of Christ’s Chief Shepherd that we can ever hope, one day, to arrive in our heavenly home.

In the old days, when someone received Holy Communion from a bishop, you would first have to kiss the bishop’s ring and then receive the Sacred Host. To our mid-twenty-first century sensibilities this seems astonishing, but the point was that kissing the bishop’s ring was, in itself, an act of faith in the authority of Christ’s Church that we could know about the Blessed Sacrament and come to believe in the presence of Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist. Without the Catholic Church, without the Pope and the Bishops, we, none of us, would have any faith at all, or indeed anything to have faith in!

Today, here in St Pancras, there are no rings to kiss. Even so, we pray for our Holy Father in Rome that he may ‘further by his teaching and good example the salvation of those over whom he is placed, so that, with the flock entrusted to his care, he may attain life everlasting.’

And we pray for our three First Communion children, that they may be kept free from sin, that they may be strengthened in their faith and increased in their love of God, and that they may be so guided by God’s love that they may one day come to live with Christ in heaven for ever.

And we pray for ourselves, that our faith in Christ and His Church may be deepened, that our love of God and the things of God may be inflamed, and that we, too, may be given the strength and the grace always to live a life of virtue so that we, too, may come one day to share the life of eternal glory.