

“I will not leave you orphans.”

Jn 14: 18

A year ago we were welcoming the election of our new Holy Father, Pope Leo. Amid the excitement of the 267th Vicar of Christ ascending the throne of Peter, the world waited with bated breath to see what this man would be like, what would be his political leanings, what would be his views on the various issues that face all world leaders in the twenty-first century, and what would be his manner in dealing with people, rich and poor alike, influential and hidden.

But for Catholics, the election of a new pope is both a matter of excitement and, at the same time, almost a non-event. It is exciting because we, like everyone else, want to see who he is and what he is like, and because we Catholics have a natural affection for the pope, whoever he is; a natural liking, a natural bent in his favour. He is *our* Holy Father; he is *our* Shepherd; he is *our* papa.

And yet, who fills the shoes of Peter, in many ways, does not matter. Whoever the pope is, he has the same task as all the popes back to Peter, the first pope. From the very moment that he accepts the vote of the conclave, the new pope is invested with *full, supreme, and universal* authority over the whole Catholic Church throughout the world. He has the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever he binds on earth is considered bound in heaven, and whatever he looses on earth is considered loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19). His task is, quite simply, to serve as the Vicar of Christ, and to continue Christ’s work of *teaching, sanctifying, and governing* the Christian peoples of the world as they battle against the trials and tribulations of this life whilst making their pilgrim way to the promised land in the next.

Historically, popes would use the first-person pronoun in the plural, saying ‘We,’ instead of ‘I.’ In part, this was a hangover from Mediæval monarchy when all kings and queens referred to themselves as ‘We.’ But theologically, what a pope is really doing when he says ‘We’ is referring to the fact that his authority is limited. No pope has a completely free hand. In matters of doctrine of faith and morals the pope may only teach what is consistent with what other popes have taught before. He cannot branch out on his own and start teaching new doctrines. So, by saying ‘We’ the pope means, ‘I and all my predecessors back to Peter declare such-and-such.’ The use of the pronoun ‘We,’ far from being a pompous clinging to old monarchical ways, is in fact a humble admission that his authority is tightly defined and strictly limited by Sacred Tradition. A pope must teach *all* that previous popes have taught, but he may teach *only* what previous popes have taught. He may develop the thinking of previous popes, and help us to understand the Church’s dogmas more clearly, but he may not leave the beaten track or go off at a tangent, or follow his own whim or fancy.

In this sense, it really doesn’t matter *who* is elected to the Chair of Peter because the job of each successive pope is exactly the same as that of his predecessors.

Many Christians outside the Catholic Church do not understand why we need a pope. To many, a pope seems to be usurping the authority of Christ Himself: only Christ has the authority to teach, sanctify and govern God’s people. But it would be very odd indeed if Christ, having completed His work here on earth and ascended back into heaven, left His followers to get on without Him or to squabble amongst themselves about what is, and what is not, an authentic interpretation of Scripture. Who, in the end, has the authority to decide what any individual chapter or verse in the Bible means?

To allay the fears of His disciples, Our Lord promised, ‘I will not leave you orphans’ (Jn 14:18). He promised that, far from abandoning us to our fate once He had

returned to His rightful place in Heaven, He would send to us another Paraclete, another Advocate or Helper, who would teach us all truth (Jn 16:13).

And how would we know who had received this Advocate and was, therefore, speaking with the authentically true voice of God? For this, Christ established His Church with the tasks of teaching all truth, of sanctifying all souls with the grace of the sacraments, and of governing and guiding His people through the ways of this life and on into the beatitude of the next.

And at the head of this Church Our Lord placed His own deputy, one who we might call Papa, or Pope: a father and shepherd who would serve God's people in holiness of heart and wisdom of mind, who would teach us to love God and the things of God, and who would guard and preserve intact all that Christ Himself had entrusted to his charge, and who would faithfully pass on to the next generation what he himself had received from his predecessors.

No small task, then! And it is for this reason we should pray for our Holy Father every day, that strengthened by the power of our prayers, he might, by his teaching and good example, lead the flock entrusted to his care to the glory of everlasting life.