

“Charism of Unity”- 21st Sunday (A)

As you and I celebrate together the Holy Eucharist in St Monica’s, at an airfield outside Madrid, 1.3 million Catholic young people have gathered to celebrate Mass with Pope Benedict. This is the closing event of 12th World Youth Day; the largest regularly held international religious events on the planet. The first World Youth Day was held in Rome in 1985. It was the idea of Bl. John Paul II and almost one of the first things Benedict XVI confirmed after his election is that he would continue the tradition. Isn’t it wonderful, and shouldn’t it fill us with hope, that right now 1.3 million young people of the Church have gathered in Madrid to praise God and grow in faith?

And what has brought these young people together, what has made of many nations one, is the pope. So how perfect that in today’s Gospel we have just heard one of the founding texts of the papacy. Around the inside of the dome of St Peter’s in Rome you can see today’s words of Jesus: *Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam* – You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And what Catholics believe is simply this: Jesus was not a short term planner; Peter was not just a gift for the first generation of Christians. Rather the Office of Peter was founded by Jesus to be a gift to the Church for its whole lifetime. As the earliest Christians had the benefit and blessing of Peter’s leadership in the years after Jesus’ Ascension so today, two thousand years later, we are no less blessed because St Peter’s successor, Pope Benedict, continues giving us the same leadership with the same extraordinary promise from Jesus: ‘I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.’

Of course, it is hard to forget the few bad popes, especially the most famously bad one Alexander VI, who five hundred years ago lived seemed to live a life of avarice and lust. His sins may have been no small cause of the Reformation. Yet not even he ever taught contrary to the Gospels – no pope has – and the fact that his papacy may have been so damaging to the Church proves the importance of the popes. And, we have, again and again, been blessed by giants who have stood up to such men as Attila the Hun and Napoleon, questioned ideologies such as Communism or unhindered Capitalism, and defended peace and the unborn. Whatever we may think about a particular pope this is certain: their ministry, their leadership of the Church, is a gift given personally to us by Christ. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.

So what are the popes for? Simply this: unity. The gift of the Office of St Peter, its charism, is to maintain unity, especially by teaching us what is true in matters of faith and morals and by leading us to Christ. Over the centuries many Christians have broken away from Rome and formed new communities which all share one characteristic: they themselves have then divided further into even smaller groups. This was Jesus’ fear. The night before he died he prayed that we would be unified and he said to Peter: ‘I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers’ (Luke 22:32). Christ is the head of the Church but this evening it is Pope Benedict in Madrid who is the visible gathering point for Bolivians and British, for Tamils and Tanzanians. Our hope for the future is the pope doing what exactly Jesus commanded him to do – unify and strengthen the Church.