

Caesarea Philippi was a spectacular setting for these words of Jesus to Peter. It was a Gentile town. At Jesus' time, it was set up as a center for the worship of Caesar by Herod's son, Philip, and so was called "Caesarea Philippi." It was here that Jesus turns to His Apostles and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

When Peter said that, rock was formed as the apostolic faith was born. That clear apostolic faith has come down to you and me because the Apostles handed it on in various ways, by their preaching, their worship, their way of life, the institutions they established, just as we hand it on in various ways.

Peter had a special role in that process because when Jesus speaks these words, "You are rock," to Peter, something profound and central to Jesus' redeeming purpose is happening. Some features of this moment are intriguing.

Of all the Apostles, the one who is referred to the most in the Gospels is Peter. We know more about him than about any of the others. His name is mentioned repeatedly. Why?

Jesus gave Peter an indispensable position in the Church, that of a "rock." Yes, Peter would die but the Church Jesus created was intended to endure to the end of time. Further, the Gospels were all written down after Peter's death, so the emphasis on these promises to Peter is curious unless they were intended to go beyond Peter and to survive him as an individual. Lastly, despite the special position given to Peter, there was no disarray in the Church after his martyrdom.

All of this makes sense only if Jesus is not simply speaking to an individual but is creating the office of the Holy Father to continue in the Church till the end of time. That office has two purposes, to ignite and to unite. First, to ignite. The Holy Father is the center of a worldwide Church that embraces every nationality and is the oldest institution in the world, our link back to Christ. The Holy Father is not there just to be admired like a valuable item in a store window. The office of the Holy Father is a living office that has shaped the past, is shaping the present, and will shape the future. He speaks the apostolic faith that should form our lives.

Do we honor and respect the Holy Father enough to embrace the apostolic faith he teaches when it comes to sexual morality, capital punishment, the sacredness of human life, human rights and Catholic identity? The Pope does not create or invent truth. He hands on and applies the truth of Jesus Christ to our lives today to ignite that faith in us, to fan the flame of faith to burn more intensely. That is his mission.

The Lord gave us the office of the Holy Father also to unite. The Holy Father reminds us that we are one Body in Christ, part of a huge community of faith, a vast network of spiritual life, support and prayer. We are not separate individuals, separate parishes, separate dioceses and separate countries. We are all part of the one, universal Church that lives in and through all of us.

The Pope is the point of unity as a Church, our unity with each other and with Christ. The Pope is given the power of the keys like that steward Eliakim in the first reading we just heard; not primarily to keep people out but to bring people into the kingdom, to open up Gospel truth to all peoples.

As a Church, we have a great gift in the office of the Holy Father, an office given to ignite and to unite, to set us on fire for Christ and to join us together as a Church. In a world that grows cold and divided and hostile, that can so easily drift from the Truth, we need places and instruments of unity. Christ gave us the office of the Holy Father to ignite us and unite us. In a world of so much fluff and image making, in the Pope we have a rock, the rock of Christ's truth which will keep us anchored to Christ in any kind of storm. When we are united with the Holy Father, we can be sure we are united with Christ in the work you and I have to accomplish here on earth.

That is the gift Christ gave us at that time which is ours too and in a place called Caesarea Philippi.