



ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER

CATECHESIS ON THE PAPACY

The Work of the Papacy Today

By Msgr. Charles Antonicelli

From the very beginning, when Jesus chose St. Peter and, in the Gospel according to St. Matthew 16:18, declared him to be the “rock” upon which he would build his Church, the pope has had a unique threefold role in teaching, sanctifying and governing the Christian faithful. This has taken many different forms over the centuries and has developed into the practice we have today. The pope is the head of the College of Bishops, the Vicar of Christ, and the pastor of the universal Church on earth. He is the one we look to for sound teaching, proper liturgical celebration, and governance, especially through the appointment of bishops throughout the world.

The pope exercises his teaching function primarily through letters written to the entire Church, known as encyclicals. These are letters which are intended to be “sent around” to the entire Church so that all might benefit from their teaching. Teaching also comes from the pope, in the form of apostolic letters and exhortations, which are intended for specific audiences or groups of people. He also has an opportunity to teach when he gives a talk at an audience, or in a homily at Mass. Pope Benedict XVI has written three encyclicals since becoming pope: *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love”), *Spe Salvi* (“Saved by Hope”), and *Caritas in Veritate* (“Charity in Truth”).

In extraordinary cases, the pope exercises his teaching function by proclaiming by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. He does so in virtue of his office as supreme pastor and teacher of all the Christian faithful. This teaching is referred to as infallible, which

means that it is free from error. The pope rarely uses this method of teaching, and when he does, it is usually in union with the College of Bishops throughout the world, especially when they are joined together in an Ecumenical Council, such as the Second Vatican Council.

The pope exercises the ordinary teaching function of his office through what is called the Magisterium. This is the living teaching office of the Church, whose task it is authentically to interpret the revelation of God, whether in the form of Sacred Scripture or Tradition. The Magisterium, in fidelity and continuity with the Apostles, develops and interprets the teaching of Jesus Christ.

The main purpose of the pope’s teaching function, therefore, is to be a guardian of the teaching received from the Apostles and to make sure it is handed down to the next generation with accuracy, faithfulness and in truth. It is not to come up with new and inventive teachings, but to interpret the authentic teaching of Jesus Christ and apply it to new, modern situations.

The pope exercises governance, or leadership, in the Church in several ways. One of the most visible ways he leads the Church is by appointing bishops to lead dioceses throughout the world. He does this with the assistance of the Congregation for Bishops in Rome and with the help of his ambassadors, or nuncios, to various countries. Here in the United States, the Apostolic Nunciature is located in Washington, D.C., in a part of the city where many other

embassies are located. The pope also has a nuncio to the United Nations in New York.

In overseeing the choice of bishops to lead God's people throughout the world, the pope chooses the men who will cooperate with him in preserving and handing down the teaching of Jesus Christ faithfully. Each bishop of a particular diocese is like one of the Apostles. Together, they make up what is called the College of Bishops, a unified body. Like the Apostles, Jesus entrusts to them the power to forgive sins and to preach his Good News to all people.

To show their closeness to the pope, every bishop throughout the world is required to make a visit to Rome once every five years to pray at the tomb of St. Peter and to meet with the pope and give him an update on the state of the Church in his particular diocese. This visit is called the *ad limina* visit, because it brings the bishop to the threshold (*ad limina*) of St. Peter's Basilica. This gives each bishop an opportunity to speak with the pope about the life of the Christian faithful in his diocese and to ask for any advice he may wish from the pope. It also reflects the collegiality of all of the bishops in union with the pope, especially when they come together to teach the faith.

The pope's leadership in the Church also gives him the opportunity to visit the local Churches, or dioceses, throughout the world. Pope Paul VI began the modern practice of overseas apostolic journeys, including the first papal visit to the United States in 1965. This practice of being a pilgrim pope was done in a very extensive way by Blessed John Paul II, and, subsequently, by Pope Benedict XVI. Before them, most popes remained in Rome and tended to the daily operation of the worldwide Church through their oversight of the congregations and dicasteries that assist with the governance of the Church. Blessed John Paul II changed that radically, in part due to the advances of modern times and the availability and ease of world travel. But, it was also to show that the pope is the shepherd and leader of the entire Church throughout the world. Traveling to different parts of the world on Apostolic visits and being physically present to the people is a generous witness of the Holy Father's leadership of the universal Church, as we experienced ourselves with Pope Benedict's visit to the United States in 2008.

The pope exercises his sanctifying function by celebrating the sacraments, which give people an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ in a concrete and personal way. That is why, when the pope travels to another country, he almost always celebrates Mass for the Christian faithful: to show that he is our spiritual leader and to lead us to Jesus Christ.

The pope also exercises his sanctifying role by praying with people in forms other than the Mass, as he often does at ecumenical gatherings. He blesses, or sanctifies, the "city of Rome and the world" (*urbi et orbi*) every Christmas and Easter with a blessing from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, the same balcony on which he appears when he is introduced to the world for the first time as pope. He imparts this same Apostolic Blessing upon all the Christian faithful who are physically present at his weekly audiences and at all papal liturgies and all who, through the use of television, radio and internet, hear his blessing.

Whenever the pope prays, whether he is celebrating Mass for thousands of people or praying privately in his chapel, he represents the communion of worship and unity of faith that is expressed in the visible reality of the Church.

(Msgr. Charles Antonicelli, a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, serves as the pastor of St. Thomas Apostle Parish. He has a law degree from The Catholic University of America, and a licentiate in sacred theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome.)