

*Sermon for Mass for the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter
St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Calton – 22nd February 2010*

The short introduction to this Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter the Apostle, which we find in the Divine Office states simply: “The Feast of the See of Saint Peter has been kept at Rome on this day from the fourth century as a symbol of the unity of the Church founded on the Apostle Saint Peter”.

That means that it was being celebrated whilst the Romans were still in Britain. It means that it was being celebrated when Saint Ninian established what we believe to be the first Christian settlement at Candida Casa on the shores of the Solway Firth. It was being celebrated before a young man called Patritius was captured on these shores and taken to Ireland as a slave. It was already well-established before Columba left Northern Ireland to plant the Faith in the islands and West Highlands of our country – and to look further afield it was being celebrated in Rome when Martin was Bishop of Tours in France, and Augustine Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. It was well-established when Pope Saint Leo the Great celebrated it in Rome, during whose reign the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon met and defined the two natures of Christ, and gave testimony to the primacy of the Roman pontiff. It is one of the most ancient feasts in the calendar of the Church.

Since it is particularly appropriate that the ordination or installation of a bishop should take place on the feast of one of the Apostles, to whose office all bishops succeed, I was delighted that this feast should emerge in the calendar at the time of my own enthronement as Archbishop of Glasgow. How could someone who had had the privilege of studying for seven years in the See of Peter, and in a college founded by a Pope, the Pontifical Scots College in Rome (founded by Pope Clement VIII in 1600) not relish the opportunity of assuming his office on such a feast as that of the See of Saint Peter the Apostle?

Pope Saint Leo the Great, one of the few popes who bear that title, has left us a sermon which the Church has incorporated into the Divine Office for this day: “One man, Peter, was chosen out from the whole world”, he said “to preside over the calling of all nations, over all the Apostles and all the Fathers of the Church. So, although in the People of God there are many priests and many pastors, Peter was to rule by his own authority overall, and over them also. Christ is the principal ruler”. Clearly Pope Leo had a sense, as Successor of Saint Peter, of his own authority and responsibility as teacher. Indeed it was in awareness of that role that he wrote his famous letter to the Council of Chalcedon, which brought forth from the Fathers gathered there their

appreciation of the right counsel he had given them as their head and spokesman, as one who though not physically in their midst was nonetheless a presence among them, rather as Jesus Himself, who said, *where two or three are gathered together there I am in your midst*.

At the same time, Pope Leo recognised that the authority that had been given to him, and his commission to feed the whole flock of Christ, was shared by the other apostles. And so he said: "Brethren, by this appointment, God conferred on this man (Peter) a great and wonderful share in his power, and where he willed that the rest of the leaders of the Church should have a gift like Peter's, it was only through Peter that he gave whatever he did not refuse to others".

And what had he given to Peter? – First of all the assurance that on the faith in Himself which Peter had just proclaimed, he would build his Church, as on a rock: "And on this rock I shall build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". To which Pope Leo adds: "On this strong foundation, (Jesus) says, I will build an everlasting temple and my Church will rise higher to heaven upon the strength of this faith".

Secondly, he promised that "The gates of hell will not imprison this confession, nor the chains of death bind it". In addressing Peter Jesus said, as paraphrased by Pope Leo: "Your voice is the voice of life: As it lifts up to heaven those who confess it, so it plunges into hell those who deny it. That is why Jesus said to most blessed Peter: 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall also be loosed in heaven'".

Those words are written large on the entablature of the basilica built over the tomb of Saint Peter, which I had the privilege ever so recently of visiting. It was the first day of our Ad Limina visit, and in the crypt, as close as we could get to the burial place of Peter, we celebrated Mass. This enormous high renaissance/early baroque church, the largest in the whole world, has become the symbol of the Catholic Church itself, built upon the rock of Peter's faith, and over his tomb.

The Ad Limina visit, meaning "to the thresholds of the Apostles" and indicating in the first place their tombs, is concluded with a visit to Peter's successor. Each of us bishops from Scotland had a personal meeting with Pope Benedict and were received by him with great courtesy. We told him of the state of our dioceses, the faith of our people and the fidelity of our clergy. We recognised the difficulties we faced and sensed the support of the Pope and of the many whom we subsequently met, his close collaborators in the

various curial offices of the See of Peter. Our reports were not so much a case of proving that we were doing our jobs, but as expressions of our shared responsibility as Shepherds of the Church of Christ. To quote Pope Leo again: "The right to this power (- the power of the keys) was handed on to the other Apostles and the provisions of this decree have been passed to all the leaders of the Church. But it was not an idle gesture to put into one man's keeping what was to be communicated to all. This commission was given to Peter in particular, because the example of Peter is put before all the leaders of the Church".

So said Pope Leo in the fifth century, as did the Second Vatican Council in the twentieth. There is a collegiality among all the bishops, which is not complete without Peter, any more than Peter is complete without shepherds who share the power and commission which was given to him, the Prince of the Apostles.

By dint of the fact that my first Ad Limina visit as Archbishop of Glasgow was to Pope John Paul II in the year following my appointment, and that due to his illness what should have been a five year period was extended to seven, it is only now that I have had what will be my only opportunity to report to the Holy See, and to the Holy Father in person, on the state of the Archdiocese. That I was able to give so positive a report was not due to unfounded optimism, but to a conviction born of the experience of these years as your Archbishop that the Archdiocese is in good heart.

Whatever the future holds for me, I will look back not only on this experience, but as each year left to me elapses and I celebrate the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, I will recall with joy and thanksgiving to God the grace of my ordination which was "fanned into a flame" by my appointment to this great Archdiocese, and my assuming the Chair of Saint Mungo eight years ago today.

I hope I will have as secure a place in your affections as I have in the Canon of the Mass where the name of the bishop is always mentioned – as secure a place as you have in my prayers and my affections. God bless you all.