

- Last Sunday our readings spoke to us of God's great desire to save souls and lead them to Heaven. No one – no matter his race or creed, no matter how grievous or numerous his sins – is beyond God's desire or God's power to save. It's for this reason that God gives us grace!
- Grace is the "free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to His appeal to become children of God" (cf. CCC 1996). Grace is a supernatural gift allowing us to share in the divine life of the Blessed Trinity.
- Six weeks ago I spoke about the differences between actual grace and sanctifying grace. Actual grace is the type of divine assistance that enables us to do good and virtuous things, and to follow God's law. Without receiving this grace first, we cannot do anything good.
- So whatever good you do, whether it be a corporal or spiritual work of mercy, your ability to do it comes through God bestowing actual grace upon you. Or if you pray to God for help with something very difficult but necessary to do, the help that God gives you is actual grace.
- Actual grace is a special divine aid given for particular occasions of need.
- Sanctifying grace, on the other hand, is "an abiding, supernatural gift that perfects the soul to enable it to live with God and act by His love" (cf. CCC 2000). First received at baptism, sanctifying grace is the necessary supernatural life of the soul required for eternal salvation.
- If we forfeit our sanctifying grace after baptism by falling into moral sin, it's restored to us through a good Confession, while receiving Holy Communion worthily helps to nourish, increase, and strengthen the sanctifying grace already present in our soul.
- Of course, the sacraments by which we receive God's saving grace, come to us through His one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Thus, the Church is the primary instrument of God's grace, which is why the Church is called the universal sacrament of salvation.
- But there's more to the Church's saving mission than just dispensing the Sacraments. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us: "*The Church is Christ's instrument. 'She is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all', 'the universal sacrament of salvation', by which Christ is 'at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men.' The Church 'is the visible plan of God's love for humanity,' because God desires 'that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit.'*" (cf. CCC 776)
- The point here is that it's through the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church that mankind is drawn to God so that we can be united to Him in this life in preparation for Heaven.
- The Church is the great dispenser of God's sanctifying grace, which is the grace by which we are saved. But the Church is also the visible sign of an invisible spiritual reality. It's the sign of God's love and of His desire that all of us become His children in Christ.
- It's for this reason – more than any other – that I am a Catholic. Raised Methodist, I feel so very blessed to have come to the conviction that, it was only in becoming Catholic that I would find the fullest access to God's saving grace.
- Our readings today teach us about the Church, and specifically about its establishment and the establishing of the papacy, by which the Church has been guided through the centuries.
- In our Gospel we hear our Lord say to St. Peter:
And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

- This discussion of bestowing the keys of the kingdom on Peter is foreshadowed in our first reading from Isaiah, which speaks of how the Lord will depose a certain Shebna and raise up Eliakim, son of Hilkiah, in his stead as master of the palace – or the king’s chief steward.
- Our Lord says that He will place the key of David on Eliakim’s shoulder, signifying an authority such that when he opens, no one will shut; and when he shuts, no one shall open.
- It was the chief steward’s role to open and close the official court business each day for the king. He wielded great authority over the kingdom, an authority so great that it is a fitting symbol of the authority Christ has to open the gates of Heaven.
- In the Gospel Jesus extends this authority to St. Peter by giving him the keys of the kingdom, and at the same time Jesus speaks of the founding of His Church.
- Christ knew He wouldn’t stay on earth forever, and so He needed a way to continue His work of salvation among men. That’s why he founded the Church on the rock of Peter.
- The Church cannot be dismissed as something extrinsic to our salvation; rather, we must understand and trust that our salvation comes to us through the Church because She possesses Christ’s authority. She holds the keys!
- The Church has the authority to teach and transmit the truths of our Faith in Christ’s name. What’s more, within the Church rests also Christ’s power to heal, to deliver from evil, to admonish, and to help those in need – all that Jesus did in His ministry on earth.
- While composed of sinners and so often led by sinners, the Church is of divine origin and wields divine authority.
- Very interestingly, the 12th century theologian, Bl. Isaac of Stella, wrote: “What is said universally of the Church, virgin and mother, is also said individually of Mary.” In other words, Our Lady is an archetype – or mirror – of the Church.
- For example, the Church is a mother because she gives birth to new Christians through the Sacrament of Baptism, and She is a virgin because She holds and preserves the Faith undefiled; whereas Our Lady is physically both a virgin and a mother.
- And just as the Church is the instrument of salvation for all mankind, Our Lady – whether we know her or not – is constantly interceding for all of us that we might be saved. This is why we call her the Gate of Heaven and the Refuge of Sinners.
- Like the Church, Mary is not the source of God’s saving grace. But her consent to be the Mother of God at the Annunciation was indispensable in God’s plan for man’s redemption. Mary is not extrinsic to man’s redemption; she plays a mighty role!
- Conceived immaculately so that she might be worthy to bear the Savior, Our Lady – like the Church – is an instrument of God’s saving grace. And this is why St. Bernard once said: “De Maria numquam satis.” Of Mary, one can never say enough.
- This weekend, as the Church universal celebrates the Coronation of Mary, Queen of Heaven and Earth, may we each enthrone her as queen of our hearts.
- With her help and intercession, may we each remain faithful members of our Lord’s one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and thereby be confident of receiving that grace that alone will save us.
- Our Lady, Archetype of the Church and Queen of Heaven, pray for us!