

**21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – A; Aug. 27<sup>th</sup> 2023**  
**Isaiah 23:19-23; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20**

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

In the popular language key is nothing but a metal piece carved in different shapes to lock and unlock a door or box. But in the Biblical context the key is used with figurative meaning. Here the key is the symbol of power or authority. When a person is entrusted with the key of a house, he is given the authority take care of that house.

The main theme of today’s first reading and the Gospel is ‘**the Keys.**’ The Administrator of King Hezekiah was divested of his power by God and the keys were given to Eliakim, who was given the material power of the kingdom. As we heard in the gospel, Peter is given the Keys of the Kingdom of God which is the Church on earth. In Caesarea Philippi Jesus makes an unusual announcement regarding the institution of his future Church. He said to 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.*” This is the only passage we see in the four gospels where we have the clear indication of the divine foundation of the first Church. Of course, in John chapter 21 we have the reference to the appointment of Peter as the head of the Church by commanding him to feed and tend the sheep in the future Church. **Among all the religions and denominations today Catholic Church is the most organized body in the world. It is divine in origin, universal, Biblical and Apostolic in nature.** And also Catholic Church is the only Church where we enjoy the gifts of the **Seven Sacraments**, and through the worthy reception of them we are filled with grace, especially by the Sacrament of the **Eucharist**. *When we enter a Catholic Church we are not simply entering a prayer hall rather we stand before the very presence of the Lord in the Eucharist.*

Of course, Catholic Church never had a smooth sailing in the history. In the very beginning of her growth the Church had to undergo severe persecution in Rome. The she had to fight with various schisms. Finally on **July 16, 1054**, Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius was excommunicated, starting the “Great Schism” that created the two largest denominations in Christianity—the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths. Then came the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther in 1517. It is estimated that 32% of Catholics left the Church and joined the Movement causing another major division. But on the other hand in 1531 Our Lady appeared in Guadalupe, Mexico to a Native American and she brought 9 million converts to the Church. Her later apparitions in Lourdes and Fatima confirmed the faith of millions of Catholics. Thanks to

the great Missionary Movement the Church had a steady growth in number down the centuries. Today Catholic Church is the largest single denomination.

Currently, the Church is facing a big threat from modernism and secularism. It is an alarming reality that at present in the European countries not even 10% of Catholics practice their faith. In our country around 25% Catholics practice their faith. But this number is deteriorating day by day. Many European countries and America face the shortage of clergy these days. Many churches in our country have a natural closure or bishops are forced to close the churches due to the lack of priests. Seeing the bleak situation, many good Catholics are worried about the future existence of the Church. They are afraid that if the situation goes like this, Catholic Church will cease to exist. Their fear is natural and human.

In fact, many forget the great truth that Jesus founded the Church on Peter, the rock. Jesus said to Peter, “***And upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.***” If the Church had to be destroyed, it could have happened in the first three centuries when the Roman Imperialism opened the severe persecution upon her. But she survived that and all other internal crisis. The ship in the rough sea is one of the symbolisms of the Church. It will be tossed, but will not sink; because Jesus is the captain of the ship. In the very beginning of Christianity the Jewish authority wanted to wipe out the little community. As it failed, Gamaliel, a Jewish Sanhedrin member warned his fellow members in these words, “**If this endeavor or activity is of human origin it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God you will not be able to destroy it. You may even find fighting against God**” (Acts 5:38&39). His words were rather a prophecy. Unfortunately, today the attacks on the Church are coming not only from outside but from her own leaders and members too. Once, Napoléon, the French Emperor, had some differences with the local Bishop. *Napoléon warned the Bishop, “Your Excellency, if I want, I can destroy your Church in no time.”* The Arch Bishop retorted, “Your Highness, we the Bishops and priests tried for 1800 long years to destroy it; but we failed.” My dear friends, if the Church is founded by Jesus Christ on Peter, it is divine and no force on earth can destroy it. The crisis will come and go; those who try to destroy the Church will eventually hit the hard rock of Peter and perish. Let us be proud of our Catholic faith.