

By Matthew-Mary Okereke, AA.

One of the things I love to bask at each time I visit the St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican is the believed relic of the Chair of St Peter famously conserved in sculpted gilt bronze by one of my favorite sculptors, Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

The question is: why is the chair preserved there on the altar? What is in a chair? The feast of the Chair of St Peter that we celebrate today is a celebration of the service of Peter and his successors; a celebration of authority as service. Notice that I did not say that it is a celebration of authority "*and*" service. I said "authority as service." This distinction between "authority as service" and "authority and service" is important because if we say "authority and service" it could be misconstrued to mean that the two need not "always" go together. But herein lies the message: Christian authority is service, once, always, and in every way.

In the Gospel reading today, we see Christ directing a question to his disciples: but who do you say that I am? A close examination of Peter's response and Christ's reaction to his response are very instructive. In his response to Jesus' question, Peter professed: You are the Christ! Sometimes, when people explain this passage of scripture, they make it seem like Peter was simply affirming that Jesus was the savior. But Does Peter's answer carry more meaning? To answer these, we must turn our attention to another question: what does it mean to be the Christ? Jesus himself answers this: the Christ is the one who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). Notice Jesus' answer. In his answer, he gives us an "a' and "b" part to what it means to be the Christ. The a-part is service, the b-part is savior. So, what Jesus inadvertently does is to tie his authority as savior to service. From this, it means that by his profession of "You are the Christ," Peter was affirming the "a" and the "b" part; he was showing that he saw Jesus as a Servant-Savior, one who always exercises his dignity and authority as savior by serving. Do you now see why Jesus was impressed with Peter's answer? In my opinion, it was because Peter showed that he had learnt what it meant to have authority that Christ bestowed authority on Peter with the famous Phrase: "*tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam*—you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church." (You can see this inscribed boldly around the St Peter's dome which is a masterpiece of Michelangelo)

How does our understanding of "authority as service" help us in our context? In our world today where there is the everyday abuse of power, the understanding of authority as service makes us realize that we are called not to lord it over others, not to use others, and not to manipulate/abuse others. Rather we are set apart to be like the Good Shepherd of our Responsorial Psalm today. The analogy of a shepherd would be better appreciated if we recall

that in Jesus' culture and even in our own cultures today, a shepherd is one who cares for the sheep, meets their needs, and protects them from harm. This is service! In fact, in the first reading today, St Peter would exhort presbyters (whom we can consider as symbol of authority) to tend the flock of God. To tend is to serve.

Friends, as we celebrate the feast of the Chair of St Peter today, let us ask ourselves: how are we handling our own little Chairs of authority? Are we truly serving others in the different contexts we find ourselves? Are we sincerely serving one another in the functions we carry out or do we use our functions to lord it over others? Have we converted our chairs of service to thrones of judgements? Have we? Friends, have we?