

Pope John Paul II is Peter for us

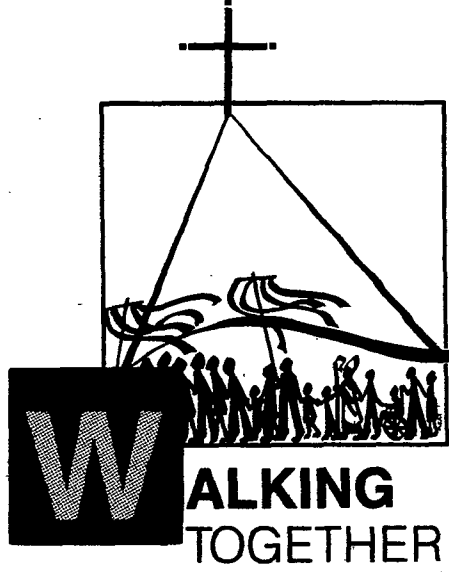
By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

When our diocesan youths took off for Denver to meet the Pope last week, they took with them the Synod recommendations about youths from their own spring parish Synods. Part of the World Youth Day experience was a sharing with people from all over the world about the particular problems youths experience in their various cultures.

Our own youths were lucky in that the Synod experience helped them to think through these difficulties beforehand. Consequently, they were able to articulate the difficulties youths and young adults encounter in their faith journey in our local church and to share the recommendations our Synod process is considering.

Papal visits seem to bring out the church's best and worst. The best, it seems to me, is the world church's dynamic experience united in solidarity in Christ Jesus around its chief servant, the bishop of Rome. Though last week's events are already days old, how strongly the images remain in me of the aging pope, always strong and vibrant in faith, performing Peter's ministry: calling together the youths of the various far-flung local churches in order to build them up in faith and love.

But the papal visits bring out the worst as well. What I dislike the most is the commercialism: the papal



"fanny packs" available at our neighborhood KMarts; the "pope soap on a rope" that we would not want to be without; the Pope John Paul II paper dolls, featuring a wide variety of papal outfits for any formal or informal occasion. To me this commercialism is the worst because anything that cheapens the papacy, anything which subtly mocks its importance, ultimately detracts from its vital Christian mission on behalf of the particular churches and the church universal.

However, another way to undercut the papacy is much more difficult to pin down because it subtly appears to support the papal ministry. In fact, though, it makes the papal office a mockery by exaggerating its impor-

tance and magnifying it out of all sense of reality. Sometimes it even attributes divine qualities to the pope. The classic 19th-century example of this exaggeration appeared in an editorial in an Italian Jesuit journal: "When the Pope thinks," the editor insisted, "it is God who is thinking in him." (Butler, *The Vatican Council*, I:77). Of course, this far exceeds church teaching.

Popes are only human beings. We've had weak popes like Liberius, who caved into pressure and agreed to heretical creeds. We've had foolish popes like Honorius I, who involved himself in a theological debate he did not understand and got himself formally condemned (posthumously) by the sixth Ecumenical Council. We've had power hungry popes like Boniface VIII who openly boasted he was "emperor no less than pope." And we've had sinful popes like Alexander VI who had more passion for gold and women than he did for church matters. But most of the popes have been good men, many of them exceptional men, scores of them even saintly, but all of them human nonetheless.

The pope's purpose is not to be God on earth, the font of new Revelation, or the last word on every earthly subject. As the second Vatican Council put it: "Jesus Christ, the eternal Pastor, set up the holy Church by entrusting the apostles with their mission as he himself had been sent by the Father. (cf. John 20:21) He willed

that their successors, the bishops, namely, should be the shepherds in his Church until the end of the world. In order that the episcopate itself, however, might be one and undivided, he put Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and communion." (LG 18)

John Paul II is Peter for us. Like his brother bishops, he is a vicar of Christ (LG 27), carrying on Christ's mission in preaching the Gospel and witnessing to the resurrection. But unlike his brothers, he has the burden of keeping them and their churches together in unity and peace. Ordinarily this task involves encouraging mutual help between the particular churches and reminding us all of the obligations of love and justice. But it can also mean safeguarding the apostolic faith or morals or, in extraordinary cases, defining that faith binding on all the Catholic faithful.

What happened in Denver last week was a microcosm of papal ministry. The pope gathered the world's youths and preached the Gospel to them, clarifying matters of faith and morals where necessary. He also gathered with the bishops of our nation in order to urge once again their mutual cooperation, especially in solving the problems of youths, but he also defended, strengthened and upheld their ministry in their local churches. This was Peter's ministry at its best.

Jesus conferred authority for service

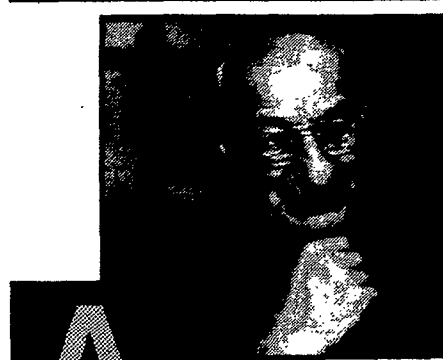
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 16:13-20; (R1) Isaiah 22:15, 19-23; (R2) Romans 11:33-36.

The image of a "key" links the first reading and next Sunday's Gospel. Keys are so important — car keys, keys to deposit boxes, house keys.

In Isaiah's day, the major-domo, or grand vizier, of King Hezekiah was Shebna. He wore a robe and sash like the other courtiers around the king. But Shebna differed from all the others, because over his left shoulder, he carried two keys like epaulets: one to the king's palace, and one to the King's treasury. These keys enabled him to control who could come to see the king and who could enter the king's treasure vaults. He was indeed a "key man."

Shebna, however, was venal. He used his powers to enrich himself and his relatives, not to serve the people. So Isaiah told Shebna that — because of his abuse of office — he would be replaced by a faithful servant, Eliakim. Isaiah likened Eliakim to a peg. One can depend on a peg to hold things



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

up. A peg is a support. Eliakim was a person, according to Isaiah, upon whom people could depend; he'd support them. He would open and close doors for the benefit of others.

In the Gospel Jesus makes Peter His "key man." At Caesarea-Philippi, Jesus had posed the question: "Whom do people say the Son of Man is?" He got quick answers: "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the

prophets." As usual, the people were wrong, as in most polls on matters of religion. Then Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter blurted out the answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." The answer almost took the wind out of Jesus. Peter had confessed who Jesus was. Jesus, elated, then tells Peter who he is going to be.

First, He says Peter is blessed, because he alone of the Twelve had received a special revelation from the Father. Then He confers a new title on Peter. He calls him "rock." Before this time, "rock" or the Latin for rock *peter* was never a personal name. Jesus confers this name to designate the office of Peter: he too will be more than a peg, he will be the firm foundation of His palace, the church.

Finally, Jesus promises a new power to Peter — a power distinct from and above the power given the apostles later of binding and loosing (Mt. 18:18): the power of the keys. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," the church on earth. The church clearly expresses the primacy of Peter and his successors as the vicars of Christ by tying in the Gospel

with the story of Shebna, the key man.

The broad power of the keys is given to Peter alone; the limited power of binding and loosing recalcitrant Christians is shared with the other apostles (Mt. 18:18). It is significant that it is Peter who receives the first Gentiles into the church (Acts 10:48); and it is Peter whose word prevailed that Gentiles be received into the church without first being circumcised (Acts 15:7). Peter alone is the vicar, the viceroy, the prime minister of Jesus in His kingdom on earth — master of the palace.

The papal flag has two colors: gold and white. On the white part is the papal tiara, signifying the pope's power to teach, rule and sanctify. Underneath the tiara are the two keys crossed to form an "X." The silver key refers to his power to absolve from sins. The gold key refers to his power to grant indulgences.

Not for self-glorification does the church claim this power for Peter and his successors. For Jesus conferred authority for service: "feed my lambs and feed my sheep." That is why the proudest title of the Vicars of Christ on earth is "Servant of the servants of God."



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