

Eleven years ago I returned to my seminary alma mater, St. Mary's in Baltimore to join my classmates in celebrating our 25th anniversary of priestly ordination. At the time the seminary was constructing a major addition to the library. Having just finished overseeing a major construction project at St. Patrick's in Cedar Falls, I peered out of one of the library's windows, and looking down one story, gazed at the footings with the rerods inserted in it. The exuberant librarian, exclaimed: "Isn't it wonderful?" "Yes," I replied. And then continued, "But before the building's all done, there will be headaches and setbacks. However, if you've planned well and laid a good foundation, then like the rest of this building, the addition will stand the test of time."

Today's readings, especially the gospel, are foundational to our life as the church. The scene of Peter's profession of faith in Jesus is familiar. For any of us who have had the privilege of visiting St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, an unforgettable sight is looking up into the dome above the papal altar, built over the apostle's tomb, and seeing Jesus' response to Peter's faith in six foot high letters inscribed on the base of the dome: "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church". For nearly two millennia, Peter's profession of faith, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" and Jesus' response, have been the solid, sure, and lasting foundation upon which the living community of the church has been built.

Peter's profession reveals that first of all, faith is a response to an invitation to relationship with the person of Jesus. Ritual, doctrine, law and whatever else we may associate with being church are all secondary to this relationship. Ultimately, Jesus is the rock, the sure and secure foundation, upon which we rest. In changing Simon's name to Peter, (the rock), Jesus affirmed Peter's faith and God's choice in establishing his faith and his person as the primary stone upon on which the faith of the rest of the church would continue to grow and rest. Jesus also entrusts to Peter his own authority to "bind and lose" (traditionally called the power of the keys). It will be Peter's mission, following Jesus' death and resurrection, to be the visible head and leader of the church. Peter's primary is be to be the official "voice" of the church in proclaiming its faith in Jesus and his gospel as well as the final arbiter in admitting or excluding

teaching and practice in the life of the community. This office of primacy and the “power of the keys”, has continued unbroken from Peter to this day and is presently exercised by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI.

When Jesus assures Peter that “the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it” he is referring to Peter’s faith. Peter as a human being would, and did fail, did sin. This is clearly, testified to by the gospels and even Peter himself in the epistles attributed to his authorship. Church history also bears witness that while its foundation of faith set on Christ does not and cannot fail, the human leader of the church, and we its members, like Peter, sometimes betray that faith and its relationship to Jesus. Yet, whenever Peter turned to Jesus in repentance, especially after his denial, Jesus forgave Peter. Perhaps it was only through passing through his sin and being forgiven that Peter came to know the depth of Jesus’ love and trust in him as the “rock.” This should be an occasion of hope for our lives, too.

While Peter occupies a central foundational place in the church, what is said to and of him, can, and should in a general way, be said of us as well. The church, all of us, rests in Jesus. We derive our corporate and personal identity from who he is and his ministry, and we are built in our faith in him through the gift of the Holy Spirit given us at our baptism and confirmation. We, the church, as the Body of Christ, like Peter and the other apostles, are also commissioned to carry forward Jesus’ saving mission. As Jesus assured Peter, he also assures us, the church will prevail until the end of time to the extent it continues to rest and continues to build on the secure foundation of Jesus. Without detracting from the primacy of Peter and the papal office, we exercise the mission and the responsibility of building up the church each time we are faithful to who Jesus is. A banner affixed to the outside of St. Stephen’s Catholic Student Center in Cedar Falls proclaimed it best: “Just don’t go to church, be church.”

There may be headaches, struggles and setbacks aplenty in our lives of discipleship, in our life as church. But confessing our faith in Jesus with Peter as the “Christ, the Son of the living God,” our foundation is secure, we, will stand the test of time.