

PETER AND FRANCIS

And so, our evening's session begins.

Settling in their chairs the class turns their attention to Joey and Ben at the front of the room. Standing before the video screen, Joey looks over those assembled; a friendly smile crossing his face.

"We'll start our journey through the RCIA course with a question," he says.

"Whose class is this?"

Looks ranging from confusion to curiosity greet Joey's question.

"What do you mean?" Jennifer asks.

"Well, Jennifer, if you were to take, say, Gloria Davis' class in oriental history at the university, you would say you are taking Dr. Davis' class, correct?"

"Yes."

"So, whose class is this?"

Hi, Tony here. Tonight, we are at the first of the instructional classes. In last Tuesday night's less formal session we got to meet those attending. There are eighteen people so far, but with the way RCIA goes, it is possible the class will grow, or possibly shrink, in the coming months. Last week was coffee and some pastries from Sam's Bistro, and a chance for Father Bob, Father John, Joey, and Ben to introduce themselves, and give those attending a glimpse into the nature of the RCIA program. Tonight, simply coffee and a couple packages of Oreos. Hopefully, this year's sessions should prove interesting, enlightening, and hold some surprises as the meetings progress.

What do you say we take a seat in the back, and listen in...

“Anyone?” Joey asks.

“Yours ... and Ben’s,” Tom Taylor says, tentatively.

“No, Tom” Joey says. “But thanks for the endorsement.”

A small chuckle meanders through the room

“Father Bob’s,” Melissa Stargell says.

“Good guess Melissa, but again, no,” Ben replies

Margaret Tillman raises her hand. “The bishop’s,” she says.

“No, but you’re getting, close.”

The room grows silent for a moment. Then, “Pope Francis”, quietly comes from the back of the room; the speaker’s tone hesitant and questioning.

“Exactly,” Joey says. “I’m curious, who said that.”

Roy Sanders raises his hand.

“Was that a guess, Roy, or did you know it all along?” Ben asks, an impish grin on his face.

“A little of both, I guess, but it made sense.”

“Roy’s exactly right. This is Pope Francis’ class.”

Perplexed looks amble across the faces of most of those seated in the class, causing Joey to pause for a moment and chuckle. “The question is simple really, he says; but the answer is critical to understanding the nature of the Catholic Church.”

“Why,” Janice asks.

“Because, it was Peter who Jesus established as the foundation of His church on earth, and entrusted the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Something we hear in Scripture. And our Lord charged him with the responsibility to lead the church in its establishment in its infancy. Throughout the centuries, it has been the tradition of the bishops of Rome, the popes, to carry on Peter’s responsibility and his work.”

A hand goes up.

“Yes, Laura.”

“What do you mean by critical to our understanding?”

“Because,” Ben replies. “The organizational structure of the church is based on what we call the apostolic succession of the priesthood.”

Sipping his coffee, Ben pauses, then continues.

“Now, in the very early days of the church, there was no organized papacy. The apostles went to different lands to carry out Jesus’ command to go and teach all nations.’ Peter, though initially in Ephesus, eventually established himself in Rome as the leader of that church. We will see that in an upcoming class on the early history of the church.”

“So, where does the papacy come from, Ben?” Melissa Stargell asks.

“Again, in the earliest days of the church, the apostles and original disciples taught the pure and unblemished gospel of Jesus; the teachings they heard from

Our Lord, Himself. However, over time, as the church evolved, various influences in the Church started posing ideas contrary to what the apostles taught. These ideas spread dissention and confusion among believers, resulting in the bishops of the church, gradually recognizing the need for a singular voice of authority. One whose purpose was to establish and set forth one teaching for all the church.”

“And they found that singular voice of authority in Peter’s successors?” Dave Palmer asks.

“Precisely, Dave. Remembering the incident in the gospel of Matthew wherein Jesus establishes his church on Peter, the bishops of the established churches of the time, understanding the import of Christ’s commission of Peter, decided the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome, would be that voice ...

“How it was to be was left up to them. Jesus left no instructions on how it would be set up. No organizational or flow chart. That was up to Peter and the successors of the original twelve apostles.

“But the word pope never appears in the Bible,” Jennifer interjects.

“Yes, Jennifer, that’s true. Realize the church evolved and in the early church a singular voice of authority wasn’t needed for many years. That’s why you won’t find the word pope in the New Testament. The office didn’t exist at that time. Understand, the Scriptures were written long before the successors of Peter in Rome were called pope.”

“So, the pope is some sort of dictator?” Susan Mantle asks.

“Well, dictator’s a bit extreme,” Ben chuckles. “First among equals’ might be a better term. And, though his office is ‘where the buck stops,’ to coin a phrase, over time the church established what is called the Magisterium, originally established by Christ that is the teaching authority of the Church. It’s composed of the bishops of the universal Church with Peter’s successor, the Pope, as its head.”

“So, the structure of the church today is based on the actions of Peter and the early apostles?” Susan asks.

“Exactly. Peter’s successors were the authoritative voice to whom the early church leaders looked for guidance. We see that, first, in chapter fifteen of the Acts of the Apostles at what is called the Council of Jerusalem. A dispute arose over a question of those wishing to enter the church and it was to Peter that they looked to for his input.”

“But wasn’t there a dispute between Peter and Paul?” Jennifer asks.

“Yes, but that doesn’t prove anything. Disputes between leaders go back a long way. That one was resolved.”

Pausing momentarily, Joey picks up the presentation.

“And another consideration should be recognized. If you read Scripture carefully, following the relationship and interplay between Jesus and Peter, we see a preeminence emerging. Jesus addresses and interacts with Peter hundreds of times. He recognizes Simon early on, changing his name, saying ‘you shall be called Peter.’ Something not done with the other eleven. It is Peter to whom Jesus constantly addresses and supports. Thus, it is the Church’s position that it’s clear from the reading of Scripture in context, Peter was given the authority by Jesus to lead the church.”

“And the bishops of the other churches, recognized Peter’s authority? I keep hearing it said all the churches of the original twelve apostles had an equal share in the early church’s authority?” Roy Sanders asks.

“Actually, Roy, at the Council of Jerusalem, only Jerusalem was an established church. That was to change over time as the efforts of the apostles were fruitful. The other apostles, going to lands other than those to whom Paul traveled also established churches, setting in place faithful disciples to oversee the teaching and activity of those churches. Thus, the first bishops. How much interaction

did the other apostles have with Peter while they were alive? ... we don't know. But remember, it was later, after the passing of all the original twelve that the papacy was established."

"And those early bishops are the forerunners of our modern-day bishops?" Melissa asks.

"Exactly."

"So, back to your original point, Ben. Why is this pope Francis' class?" Roy asks.

Setting down his coffee, Ben smiles. "Simply, Roy, because it was Peter who, after the Resurrection, was told by Christ three times, to feed his sheep. To nourish the people, to teach all nations with the gospel Jesus taught. Ultimately, it is Peter's responsibility to conduct this class; to teach you."

Janice chuckles. "So, maybe next week we'll see Pope Francis at the coffee pot when we arrive?"

Scattered laughter greets Janice's question.

"Well, Francis can't be in two places at once, Joey says, an impish smile on his face. So, he gives Bishop Richardson the authority and responsibility. And, since there are one hundred and twenty-two parishes in the diocese, the bishop, not being able to be in two places at one time, either, gives the authority to St. Kate's pastor, Father Bob. Who, having numerous obligations of his own, gives it to Ben and myself."

"Got it," Janice chuckles.

"But again, you never know," Ben chuckles.

"So, any more questions?" Joey asks.

None are forthcoming.

“Okay. I’m sure we’ll come back to this idea in our continuing discussion. So, let’s take a break, stretch our legs, and maybe grab a cup of coffee and a cookie or two.”