

Homily 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2026

‘Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church’ (Today’s Gospel)

Peter dismissed Jesus when his brother Andrew informed him that he had found The Messiah. Peter protested when Jesus instructed him to ‘go out into deeper water’ having caught nothing all night. Peter attempted to obstruct Jesus’ mission at Caesarea Philippi and was scolded by Jesus, ‘Get behind me Satan!’ (Mk 8:27-33) Peter slept whilst Jesus suffered agony in The Garden of Gethsemane. Peter in anger and frustration at Jesus’ arrest, took to the sword, cutting off the ear of Malchus, the High Priest’s servant. Peter denied ever knowing Jesus not once, not twice but three times. Family man Peter was far from perfect, and the Gospels portray him as a vulnerable, hot headed, impetuous and stubborn individual. Peter was hardly the stuff of which leaders or ‘Popes’ are made.

In today’s Gospel account of Caesarea Philippi, St Matthew (Mt 16:13-20), after Peter’s declaration that Jesus is The Christ, omits Peter’s strong protests against Jesus’ prophecy that he should suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem and rise again on the third day. In Matthew’s account, Jesus simply replies, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven**, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’

Jesus, with that response, reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah where Hilkiah is seen as a ‘type’ (a foreshadowing)* of Peter, ‘The Lord says this “I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And **I will place on his shoulder the key of the House of David**. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”’*** David, the greatest Old Testament king from whose line Jesus was born, was hardly a paragon of virtue. He was lustful, jealous, deceitful and cunning. Spying on the beautiful Bathsheba as she bathed David sent her Commander husband, Uriah the Hittite, into the front line of battle, hoping he would be killed in order that he might take Bathsheba as his wife.

So why are the vulnerable and impetuous Peter and the lustful and cunning David chosen as great pillars of The New and Old Testaments respectively? St Paul in today’s Second Reading (Romans 11:33-36) offers us some insight - God’s wisdom and the wisdom of men are very different, ‘Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?’

Clearly, ‘God’s ways are not man’s ways.’ It appears that vulnerable and weak unpretentious disciples enable God to act through them. These imperfect disciples are unafraid to show their faults and their fragile human nature. Yet it is such as these who seem to thrive pastorally and fill their churches to bursting! On the other hand, self-sufficient role players of perfection, lacking in humility seem to watch on as their flocks dwindle and scatter. There are abundant examples of the former: Don Giuseppe, my

Parish Priest in Italy, although acutely aware of his many sins was a man of deep compassion for and love of his flock. Thousands thronged the streets at his funeral; a close priest friend of mine, despite accepting his fragility, 'my faults are many', is full of wisdom, mercy and understanding of the human condition. His parish church is bursting at the seams; Cardinal Hume whilst acknowledging his unworthiness, as both Abbot and Cardinal of Westminster, demonstrated humility, meekness of heart and possessed that gaze making you feel you were the only one in the world. His humility and simplicity has inspired many; Thomas Merton, the great mystic and Trappist monk, although he is believed to have fathered a child while studying at Cambridge University, his poverty of spirit, honesty about his human urges and spiritual writings have deeply touched millions across the globe; Pope Francis who in spite of his 'confessions' regarding regrettable relations with the ruling Junta (whilst Superior of The Argentinian Jesuits) and his 'who am I to judge' attitude was a champion of the poor, marginalised and excluded and dearly loved by millions of believers and non-believers alike.

(Pope Francis also emphasised this when **speaking of the great women of the Church**, noted that **they too sometimes felt "incapable and limited"** when confronted with tasks beyond them. Their strength, he said, came not from self-sufficiency but from the love of God). ***

So as pastors and laity alike should we not, as mere creatures, acknowledge our nothingness, our unworthiness and our weaknesses before God and just try our best. Let's not pretend to be perfect, simply because we are not. Let's take off our masks and refrain from dressing up and playing roles of perfection (Goffmann). Let's just be our humble, needy, and sometimes broken selves, allowing **God to work through us** just as he did, with David and Peter. Let's learn from divine wisdom and be REAL, allowing God to use us despite our weaknesses to confound the strong.!

Poignantly, in Ingmar Bergmann's 1976 film 'Dr. No', Jenny Isaksson a psychiatrist married to another psychiatrist; both are successful in their jobs but slowly and agonizingly Jenny succumbs to a complete mental breakdown. She is haunted by images and emotions from her past and eventually cannot function as a wife, doctor, or individual. Eventually she tries to commit suicide. In her subsequent psychiatric treatment on the road to recovery, she encounters a doctor and, in her struggle to make sense of life, she asks him in utter frustration and desperation, '**What is it that would make life meaningful and worth living for you?**' He replies, '**If only one person would take away the veils, the props, the prearranged scripts and be real that would make all the difference.**'

How stunningly liberating is that!

Typology in Holy Scripture

* In the Bible, “type” usually refers to something in the Old Testament that foreshadows, illustrates, or points forward to something fulfilled later, especially in Christ and the New Testament.

This is called typology.

For example:

- Adam is described as a “type” (Greek: typos) of Christ. Adam represents humanity; Christ is presented as the representative of a new humanity (Romans 5:14).
- The Passover lamb can be understood as a type pointing toward Christ, who is called “our Passover” (1 Corinthians 5:7).
- The bronze serpent in Numbers 21 is used by Jesus as a picture pointing to His being “lifted up” on the cross (John 3:14–15).
- Jonah’s three days in the fish are used by Jesus as a sign pointing toward His death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40).

So, in simple terms:

A biblical “type” is a person, event, object, or institution that serves as a pattern or foreshadowing of something that comes later.

It is important, though, not to assume that everything in the Old Testament is a type. Good typology is based on connections the Bible itself establishes, rather than simply finding symbolic similarities.

****Commentary on Isaiah 22: 15-23**

The office of the Davidic Vicar/Prime Minister Eliakim described in Isaiah 22:21-25:

1. He wore a garment that identified his high office (verse 21).
 2. He was a “father” to the people of the kingdom (verse 21).
 3. As the Vicar of the King, the Davidic chief minister kept the “key of the house of David”, referring to the palace and its administration (verse 22).
 4. The key (singular) was his sign of authority and gave him the power to “open and shut” or “bind and loose”—make binding decisions for the good of the palace and the kingdom (verse 22).
 5. His position will be secure and he is responsible for the glory of his family—from the least to the greatest member—all the “vessels”, “from cups to pitchers” (verse 24).
- Simon-Peter, like Eliakim was chosen for his office by God Himself as the new Davidic King’s chief steward or Vicar of the New Covenant Kingdom. His successors are the Popes, the “fathers” to the people of the new Jerusalem that is the Kingdom of the

Church, who continue to serve today. They have the same authority as the other Davidic Vicars:

1. The Pope wears a special garment identifying his high office.
2. He is a “father” to the people of Christ’s kingdom of the Church.
3. He symbolically carries the “keys” (plural) of Heaven that is his sign of authority over the “house” of Jesus (the eternal Davidic king) that is the Kingdom of the Church.
4. He has the power to make binding decisions for the Church and his pronouncements are infallible on issues of faith and morals.
5. He is responsible for the spiritual well-being of all members of the family of the Church from the least to the greatest members.

***** Vulnerability and Saintliness is Not the Monopoly of Men**

1. St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) — the vulnerability of smallness

Perhaps the clearest example. Thérèse did not present herself as heroic or spiritually impressive. She experienced emotional fragility, bereavement, illness, spiritual darkness and, near the end of her life, a profound trial of faith. Her “Little Way” emerged precisely from accepting her dependence upon God rather than pretending to spiritual strength. The Vatican notes that her final years involved a prolonged trial of faith, about which she left exceptionally intimate testimony.

Why she endears herself to ordinary Catholics: she makes holiness seem possible for people who feel small, anxious, inadequate or spiritually unimpressive.

2. St Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) - the vulnerability of being human

Teresa is one of the Church’s greatest mystics, yet she is wonderfully un-mystical in her humanity. She writes candidly about her personality, friendships, ambitions, illnesses, distractions, resistance, fears and failures. She could be funny, exasperated and intensely practical. She also knew what it was to feel unequal to the enormous reforming work she had undertaken. Pope Francis specifically recalled her description of herself as a “**little woman**” faced with a task beyond her.

Why she endears herself: she gives permission to be complicated. Sanctity does not require having a serene personality.

3. St Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) — the vulnerability of passion

Catherine was extraordinarily courageous, but she was not emotionally detached. Her spirituality was intense, passionate and sometimes almost painfully direct. She suffered over the corruption and division within the Church and felt personally responsible for urging the Church’s leaders toward reform. John Paul II highlighted both her profound love for Christ’s Church and her extraordinary role in the Church’s history.

Why she endears herself: she shows that holiness can include anger at injustice, anguish over the Church, passionate relationships and an almost unbearable desire to make things right.

4. St Clare of Assisi (1194–1253) — the vulnerability of dependence

Clare's life is sometimes presented simply as heroic poverty. But beneath that is a woman who experienced sickness, physical weakness, dependence upon others and genuine danger. During her final illness, she received the Eucharist as her great consolation. John Paul II described her as the woman who fixed her gaze upon the poor and crucified Christ.

Why she endears herself: her holiness is not the holiness of someone who is invulnerable; it is the holiness of someone who discovers Christ precisely in weakness and dependence.

5. St Edith Stein / Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (1891–1942) — the vulnerability of the searching mind. Edith Stein is particularly compelling because her vulnerability was intellectual and existential. She experienced herself as restless and unfulfilled, struggled with questions of truth and meaning, and underwent a long journey from atheism through philosophy to Christianity and Carmel. She also encountered professional rejection and the devastating persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. The Vatican's biography emphasises both her sense of human limitation and the "deep wounds" represented in her life.

Why she endears herself: she demonstrates that faith need not be the opposite of intellectual struggle. Her path to God included doubt, searching, disappointment and radical reorientation.

6. St Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) (1910–1997) — the vulnerability of spiritual darkness. This is perhaps one of the most striking modern examples. The public image was of extraordinary certainty and compassion; privately, her writings reveal decades of profound spiritual darkness and an experience of God's apparent absence. Her vulnerability is particularly powerful because it contradicts the assumption that great faith necessarily feels like great faith.

Why she endears herself: she shows that faithfulness and felt closeness to God are not the same thing. One can continue loving when consolation disappears. The Vatican's account of her life places her vocation within a long trajectory of sacrificial service rather than depicting her as someone untouched by human suffering.

7. St Josephine Bakhita (c. 1869–1947) — the vulnerability of the wounded survivor. Bakhita's holiness is especially moving because she carried the scars of slavery and trauma. Her story is not one of escaping suffering through religious sentimentality; rather, Christianity gradually became for her a discovery that she was loved and possessed a dignity that no human being had the right to take away.

She can speak powerfully to Catholics who have experienced **trauma, exploitation, displacement or the loss of personal agency**.

8. St Gianna Beretta Molla (1922–1962) — the vulnerability of costly love. Gianna is compelling because her holiness unfolded amid very ordinary human realities: professional responsibilities, marriage, motherhood, pregnancy and difficult medical decisions. Her final pregnancy involved a serious medical condition, and she chose to continue the pregnancy despite the grave risk to herself.

Her appeal lies in the fact that sanctity here is not primarily mystical or monastic. It is embodied in **marriage, motherhood, medicine, fear and mortality**.

9. St Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774–1821) — the vulnerability of grief and uncertainty Seton experienced widowhood, financial hardship, religious controversy, conversion and the deaths of loved ones. She did not enter Catholicism from a position of security; her journey involved enormous personal and social cost.

She is particularly approachable because her sanctity grew amid the messiness of **family life, bereavement, practical responsibilities and uncertainty about the future**.

10. St Mary MacKillop (1842–1909) — the vulnerability of being misunderstood by the Church. Mary MacKillop is fascinating because she was not simply a saintly woman whom everyone immediately recognised as saintly. She experienced ecclesiastical opposition and was eventually excommunicated—an episode later lifted when the circumstances were resolved.

That makes her a remarkable figure for Catholics who have experienced **disappointment with Church structures, misunderstanding, authority, or the painful gap between loving the Church and being hurt by members of the Church**.

The Vatican has included Mary MacKillop among women whose lives are proposed as significant witnesses of holiness and human dignity.

Important Theological Point

The most endearing Catholic women are often **not those whose humanity has been polished away by hagiography**.

They are women in whom we can see:

- **Thérèse:** “I am little.”
- **Teresa:** “I cannot do this by myself.”
- **Catherine:** “I cannot bear what is happening to the Church.”
- **Edith:** “I am searching for truth.”
- **Mother Teresa:** “I cannot feel God.”
- **Clare:** “I am physically weak.”
- **Bakhita:** “My humanity has been violated.”
- **Mary MacKillop:** “Even the Church’s structures can wound me.”
- **Elizabeth Seton:** “I have lost the people I love.”
- **Gianna:** “I am afraid, but I choose love.”

That is arguably one reason the Church's great women saints remain so beloved. **Their holiness does not make them less human; it makes their humanity transparent to grace.**

And this is very close to Pope Francis's own formulation: these women sometimes knew themselves to be limited and incapable, yet their vulnerability became the place from which they received the strength to fulfil their vocation.