



**His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville**

Bishop Braxton prepared this homily to be delivered at the 5 PM Mass on August 27, 2023, at St. Theresa Parish in Belleville. However, on that date, the Mass was changed to 4 PM to accommodate the Parish picnic. Since the Bishop was unaware of this change, the homily was never delivered.

Sermon:

“Who Do You Say the Son of Man Is?”

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene:* This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Eight of the thirteen people who hope to be the nominee of their party for President of the United States participated in Wednesday evening’s Milwaukee debate, which was viewed by fewer than 13 million people. A small number when you think of the more than 240 million Americans eligible to vote. In a sense, each candidate is asking the same question Jesus is asking us in this evening’s reading from Matthew 16: 13-20. Who do people say that I am? Who do the viewers say that these politicians are? Who do these candidates themselves say that they are? In the end, these presidential hopefuls long for the American people to say that they are the right person to lead this country beginning in January 2025.

Of course, history teaches that Americans will not know the answer to this important question until after a nominee has been elected and served as president for four years.

Jesus Himself is doing something similar in His dialogue with His disciples and with us when He asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Though our parents may have answered this question for most of us when we were baptized, each of us, at some point, should ask ourselves, what do we think of Jesus of Nazareth?

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Using His favorite title for Himself, Jesus is essentially asking: “What are the people who have been listening to me and watching me saying about me? Do they think I am someone exceptional? Do they think I am making claims about myself that are difficult, even impossible to believe? This is a question people have been asking for 20 centuries: Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Why does He matter? The question really isn’t: who do people say Jesus Christ is?” This version of the question already implies the answer in the title “Christ”. As you know, no one called Jesus of Nazareth, “Jesus Christ” in His lifetime. The title “Christ” means messiah, God’s anointed one, a title given to Jesus as an expression of faith.

The response of the disciples to Jesus’s question is quite unusual. “Some say you are John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” But John, Elijah, Jeremiah, and the great prophets have all died. Are the disciples suggesting that the people think that Jesus is someone who has returned to life from the realm of the dead? Instead of asking that tantalizing question, Jesus gets to His real point. What about you? Who do you say that I am? Matthew then has the bold Simon, who doubted that Jesus was truly walking towards him on the stormy sea, make a total and complete profession of faith. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus then addresses Simon as *petrus*, or “rock.” “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” This is the first time, and one of the few times, the word “church” appears in the gospels. Even though scripture scholars suggest that the word “church” was not a part of Jesus’s vocabulary, this verse is critical for several reasons. First, Jesus trusts Peter’s unsteady faith enough to make him the leader of the apostles. (Remember, after Jesus is arrested, Peter will deny that he even knows Him). Second, those of you who have been to Rome know that these words (“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church”), are

inscribed in Michaelangelo's massive dome of the Basilica of St. Peter, which covers the traditional site of Peter's burial. Third, as Catholics, we believe this Petrine authority continues in the ministry of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, and Successor of St. Peter.

Jesus's question is now directed to each of us gathered in St. Teresa's Church this evening. Who do we say the Son of Man is? Jesus is not interested in our memorized catechism answers. He is asking us to dig deep into our hearts and search for our true answer to His question.

Jesus wants an answer now before we routinely proclaim the words of the Creed in a few moments. Now? You may ask. I can't give Jesus an answer NOW! I have been busy all day. I have not been thinking about what I believe about God, what I believe about Jesus. But He insists: Do you believe I am the Christ, the Son of the living God, or not? He reminds us that this is a question we should have been answering over and over at different stages in our lives, from the time of our confirmation to today. As Christians, we are called to prayerfully answer this question every day: at home, at work, at school, in the hospital room, at the death beds of those we love, during those nights when we cannot sleep because we are faced with so many personal problems. Jesus' question requires an answer, not only when our lives are going well, but also when our lives are falling apart. That's when what we believe about Jesus truly matters. Jesus is not expecting us to mouth Peter's words, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He is expecting us to be living our answer in what we do and in what we say each day.

Today's gospel links Peter's profession of faith with the Christian community, the Church; an important reminder to each of us that we do not confess faith in Christ on our own. We do so in communion with the whole People of God, the faith Community.

It is difficult to live by faith correctly and consistently on our own. Each of us needs the spiritual nourishment that comes from being a part of a parish family. Living a Christ-centered life is far more difficult if we try to do it alone. Not only do we need the sacraments of the Church, especially Eucharist and Reconciliation, but also, we need the companionship of fellow believers.

We all know that the Catholic Church is not perfect since her members are all redeemed sinners. But, the more involved you are in the spiritual life of

your parish (not merely its social life), the more likely you will meet outstanding Christians whose lives manifest that they, like Peter, confidently answer Jesus’s question by the way they live as Christian wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, grand parents, and neighbors.

It may be that the life of the person sitting next you, in front of you, or behind you provides you with an answer to Jesus’s question. It may also be that the person sitting next to you, in front of you, or behind you, is looking to the example of your life for the answer to His question. As you receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, this should be a recommitment to living your personal response to Jesus’s question. “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

In the face of a world in crisis, your answer cannot be a remote, pious response. If you truly believe that Jesus is the Christ, you are compelled to apply His teachings to your response to the world-wide crisis of climate change; to your response to the unending plague of conflict and war in our world; to your response to the widespread indifference to the dignity of every human life from the moment of conception to natural death; to your response to the horrendous horror of racial conflict in the United States, revealed again by a 20 year old man who bluntly expressed his extreme racial hatred as he slaughtered three innocent people of color at a Dollar Store in Jacksonville, Florida, even as the nation marked the 60th anniversary of the March for Justice and Freedom in Washington, D.C., where the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his “I Have a Dream” address. If we do not take our response to Jesus’s soul-stirring question out of the church and into the world, than it is no response at all.

After Wednesday’s debate, a number of viewers complained that the candidates often repeated memorized attack lines. They did not reveal their true selves, which is what voters wanted to hear. In the gospel passages that we hear each Sunday, Jesus gradually reveals His true self, which makes it possible for us, at some point in our lives, to answer His question.

Tomorrow, the Universal Church honors the great St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, and Doctor of the Church. He lived a life of sinfulness, self-indulgence, and the denial of faith. His mother, St. Monica, prayed and worked for his conversion. When He finally answered Jesus’

question: who do you say the Son of Man is? He was open to conversion. He could at long last proclaim with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Still, in his final years, Augustine prayed, “Lord, I do believe in you. Help me in my unbelief.” And, at the end of his life, he lamented, "Oh Lord, too late have I loved You!" As Jesus asks each of us, who do we say that He is? Let us pray that we will not lament, “Oh Lord, too late have I loved You!”

St. Augustine of Hippo, Pray for us!

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever. Amen.