

PETER'S VICAR or HOW'S THAT AGAIN?

by Solange Hertz

The Church has buried two Popes since the close of Vatican Council II. The text of the Mass used on these occasions was, needless to say, the new one, first promulgated in 1966. Even after so many years, the new Prayer for a deceased Pontiff in the Missal -- listed for all to see as "Pro Papa" under "Orationes pro Defunctis" -- may be a big surprise, if not worse, to many faithful who haven't kept abreast of the subtler changes.

His Excellency James Hector MacDonald, Bishop of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, has provided the occasion for noting one such change, which so far seems to have escaped common notice. In an extremely provoking, if somewhat confusing article relayed in the January 1992 issue of Canada's *Challenge Magazine* under the title "Local Church and Universal Church," Bishop MacDonald begins by telling his readers, "The Church is PEOPLE [capitals not ours] who are enriched by their experience of Jesus of Nazareth, who associate with others who have the same experience and interest, and who avail themselves of all the means available in their journey to understand Jesus better and to follow Him more closely."

Oh? Bishop MacDonald goes on to say, "By local Church we mean diocese -- a specific portion of the People of God over which a Bishop presides. By Universal Church we mean the entire People of God over which the Pope presides." This is admirably clear. What follows is considerably less so: "One approach to understanding the nature of both the local Church and of the Universal Church is to examine the titles: 'Vicar of Christ' and 'Vicar of Peter.' *The distinctive title of the Pope is 'Vicar of Peter.'*"

Here the italics are very much our own, for if this title is one which sacred

Tradition has normally applied to Peter's successors through the centuries, many of the faithful, both clerical and lay, have been woefully unaware of it. There must be some mistake. Well, no. As proof of his startling assertion, Bishop MacDonald cites the opening prayer of the aforementioned new Mass for a deceased pope, which reads, "May your servant, our Pope, Vicar of Peter, etc."

His Excellency turned out to be entirely correct, for the new Altar Missal, consulted posthaste in near panic, offers the following in uncompromising black and white: God our Father, you reward all who believe in you. May your servant, N., our Pope, vicar of Peter and shepherd of your Church, who faithfully administered the mysteries of your forgiveness and love on earth, rejoice with you forever in heaven. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. An exceptionally slipshod translation of the normative Latin? Not at all. The Latin reads, *Deus, fidelis remunerator animarum, praesta, ut famulus tuus Papa noster N., quem Petri constituisti vicarium et Ecclesiae tuae pastorem, gratiae et miserationis tuae mysteriis, quae fidenter dispensavit in terris, laetentur apud te perpetuo fruatur in caelis. Per Dominum.*

Simple folk, reading in *Challenge Magazine* for the first time and without warning that the Pope they always thought was the Vicar of Christ is actually only the Vicar of Peter, could be very upset. Could that be one reason this title was not widely publicized in the course of the last 26 years? According to the Bishop of Charlottetown "The Pope and the Pope alone is the Vicar of Peter in the Universal Church and in every local Church throughout the world. The Pope's principal ministry as Vicar of Peter is that of unity. As Vicar of Peter, the Pope possesses full, supreme and universal power over the Universal Church."

But soft, the article goes on to say, "Every Bishop (including the Pope) who leads a local Church is the "Vicar of Christ" in the local Church he leads. . . . The Pope, as Bishop of Rome, exercises this kind of leadership for his diocese, the diocese of Rome. However, his leadership as Vicar of Peter for the Universal Church is somewhat different, for the world is not one diocese. The Bishop of Rome, in relationship to the Universal Church as Vicar of Peter, is called upon to implement not only his pastoral judgment, but what he believes to be essential and/or important judgment for the unity of the dioceses."

How's that again? If the theology here proves too difficult, perhaps what follows might make more sense: "This very important distinction is often misunderstood. . . . Today there are Catholics who when they have a concern, bypass their local Church, their bishop, and go directly to Rome. In my view this practice distorts the nature of the Church."

Well, in this particular instance, the urge to fly to Rome for some explanation of whose Vicar the Pope is, may prove overpowering. Before flying to Rome, however, the befuddled Catholic can fly to the old St. Pius V Missal and open it to the liturgical prayer formerly used by the Church over the centuries. Finding "For a Deceased Supreme Pontiff" under the heading "Various Prayers for the Dead," he will read:

Deus, qui inter summos Sacerdotes famulum tuum N. ineffabili tua dispositione connumerari voluisti: praesta, quaesumus; ut, qui Unigeniti Filii tui vices in terris gerebat, sanctorum tuorum Pontificum

consortio perpetuo aggregetur. " Grant that he who ruled on earth as the vicar of your only begotten Son, may be admitted into the company of your holy popes forever. What a relief! No mention anywhere of any mere Vicar of Peter. Apparently, this title applies only to the last three occupants of his Chair. May he and all those Holy Vicars of Christ now reigning in heaven intercede for us in our present confusion !!!

The Remnant

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