

When Christ ascended into heaven, He didn't leave behind a loose association of believers with no authority, no structure, and no leaders. He left behind a Church. And that Church was built upon the Apostles.

In this Sunday's Gospel, Christ gives His final command before the Ascension: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." He sends the Apostles out with authority to teach, govern, and sanctify in His name. Then He promises, "I am with you always, until the end of the age." That promise didn't end with the death of the Apostles. Christ continues to guide His Church through the authority and structure He Himself established.

Many people today struggle with the idea of authority in religion. Our culture praises independence and personal opinion. Many think doctrine should change according to popular opinion or personal preference. Others believe every Christian should simply interpret Scripture for himself. But

that idea would've been completely foreign to the early Church.

From the beginning, Christianity was hierarchical.

The word "hierarchy" simply means "sacred order." It refers to the ordered structure through which Christ governs His Church. This structure isn't man-made in its foundation. Its roots come directly from Christ Himself.

At the center of this hierarchy is the pope.

The pope is the bishop of Rome and the successor of Saint Peter. Among the Apostles, Peter held a unique role. Christ gave him the keys of the Kingdom and commanded him to strengthen his brethren and feed Christ's sheep. The pope continues this office in the life of the Church.

The pope serves as the visible source of unity for Catholics throughout the world. He safeguards doctrine, settles major disputes, appoints bishops, and protects the Church from falling into doctrinal error. Catholics don't

believe the pope invents new teachings. His task is to preserve faithfully what Christ revealed and what the Apostles handed down.

This office has existed continuously for nearly two thousand years. From Saint Peter to the present day, there has never been a break in that succession. That continuity matters because it connects the Church today directly to the Church founded by Christ.

Next in the hierarchy are the cardinals.

Cardinals are senior churchmen chosen by the pope to assist him in governing the universal Church. Most cardinals are bishops, though not all historically have been. Their most visible duty is electing a new pope during a conclave after the death or resignation of a pope.

Many cardinals oversee large dioceses throughout the world or lead important offices in Rome. While cardinals hold great influence, it is important to remember that “cardinal”

isn't a separate sacramental rank. A cardinal is usually a bishop entrusted with special responsibilities by the Holy Father.

Then there are patriarchs and major archbishops.

These titles are most common in the Eastern Catholic Churches, which are fully Catholic and united with Rome while preserving their own liturgical traditions and customs. Patriarchs govern ancient and historically important Eastern Churches. Their role is similar to that of a father overseeing a large family of bishops and faithful within a particular tradition. There are a few western patriarchs — notably the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Patriarch of Venice.

Major archbishops serve similar functions in certain Eastern Catholic Churches that are not designated as patriarchates. These offices remind us that the Catholic Church is not limited to one language, culture, or liturgical expression. The Church is universal.

Archbishops govern important archdioceses, which are usually larger or historically significant dioceses. Some archbishops are also called metropolitan archbishops because they oversee an ecclesiastical province made up of several dioceses. They have certain limited responsibilities toward the bishops within that province, helping maintain unity and discipline.

But the backbone of Church leadership throughout the world is the office of bishop.

A bishop is a successor of the Apostles. Through apostolic succession, every validly ordained bishop traces his authority back to the Apostles themselves. This is one of the most important teachings about the Church's structure.

A bishop possesses the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders. He teaches the faith, governs his diocese, ordains priests and deacons, and safeguards the liturgy and doctrine

within his territory. He is the chief shepherd of the local Church entrusted to him.

When Saint Paul instructed Timothy and Titus about governing the Church, he was speaking to bishops. From the earliest centuries, Christians understood that bishops held authority passed down from the Apostles.

Without bishops, there is no priesthood. Without bishops, there is no apostolic succession. Without bishops, the visible structure established by Christ disappears.

Working closely with bishops are priests.

Priests share in the ministry of the bishop. They are ordained to preach the Gospel, celebrate the sacraments, forgive sins, and offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

For most Catholics, the priest is the member of the hierarchy they know best. He baptizes their children, hears confessions, witnesses marriages, visits the sick, buries the dead, and offers Mass Sunday after Sunday.

The priest doesn't act on his own authority. He acts in union with his bishop and under the authority of the Church. At every Mass, the priest names both the pope and the local bishop during the Eucharistic Prayer as a sign of that unity.

The priesthood isn't merely a job or profession. It's a spiritual fatherhood. The priest gives his life for the salvation of souls.

Then there are deacons.

The diaconate goes back to the earliest days of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostles appointed men to assist in the charitable and practical needs of the Christian community. This became the foundation of the diaconate.

Deacons proclaim the Gospel, preach, baptize, witness marriages, and assist at the altar. Some deacons are transitional deacons preparing for priesthood, while permanent deacons

may remain deacons for life, often while also living family lives and secular professions.

Their role is one of service. In fact, the word “deacon” comes from a Greek word meaning servant.

Monsignors are priests who have received certain honorary titles from the pope in recognition of service to the Church. “Monsignor” is not a separate sacramental rank like bishop or priest. It is an honorific title. Some monsignors serve in diocesan leadership, seminaries, or Vatican offices.

Beyond these ranks are also religious brothers and sisters, abbots and abbesses, and many others who contribute to the life of the Church. While not all belong to the sacramental hierarchy, they serve important roles in teaching, prayer, education, charity, and missionary work.

All of this can sound very institutional to modern ears. Some people hear about hierarchy and immediately think only

of bureaucracy or power. But the Church's hierarchy exists for one reason: the salvation of souls.

Christ established order because truth matters.

Without authority, confusion spreads quickly. History proves this repeatedly. Wherever Christian authority is rejected, division multiplies. One group teaches one doctrine, another teaches the opposite, and both claim to follow Scripture.

But Christ established a visible Church precisely so His followers could remain united in truth.

That unity doesn't mean every churchman is holy. The Church has endured weak bishops, corrupt clergy, and sinful leaders throughout history. Judas himself was one of the Twelve. Yet the sins of men do not destroy the promises of Christ.

The Church survives not because every leader is virtuous, but because Christ remains faithful to His Church.

The Ascension reminds us of this. Christ ascends into heaven, but He does not abandon His people. He continues to guide the Church through the Holy Spirit and through the shepherds He has appointed.

So today we should pray for the entire hierarchy of the Church: for the pope, the cardinals, the patriarchs, the archbishops, the bishops, the priests, and the deacons. Their responsibilities are enormous. They will answer before God for the souls entrusted to them.