TOGETHER
IN CHRIST

Rt Rev. Hugh Gilbert, O.S.B.
Bishop of Aberdeen

R.C. DIOCESE OF ABERDEEN
Bishop's Office
St Mary's House, 14 The Chanonry,
ABERDEEN, AB24 1RP
Tel: 0044 1224 319154
E-mail: bishop@rcd-abdn.org

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Pastoral Letter to be communicated to the faithful of the Diocese at all Masses of the 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There can be times in life when we need to remind ourselves – very clearly – of the principles by which we want to live. Situations may arise when, for example, telling the truth, respecting others, being faithful to our marriage or responding to the suffering becomes a challenge. We have to tell ourselves that these are not optional things, and reaffirm the loyalties by which we live.

As in personal life, so in the life of the Church. In the latter situations have arisen which calls for this kind of reaffirmation. Recently, the Society of St Pius X chose to ordain four new bishops without the permission (or *mandate*) of the Pope. This constitutes an act of schism. Next Saturday, 25th July, something similar is scheduled to occur in Orkney when the Superior of the Sons of the most Holy Redeemer intends to be ordained bishop by three unauthorised bishops from the Americas. This likewise constitutes an act of schism and will place those engaged in it outside the Catholic Church. Both of these actions, and especially the latter, touch our own diocese of Aberdeen, and not in a good way. Objectively, we are dealing with a break from the unity of the Church.

The Church is responding "officially" to these regrettable events. But first come prayer and faith. As to prayer, the Masses celebrated throughout the diocese this Sunday will use the prayers provided for the Unity of the Church. Such common prayer has the power of the Holy Spirit in it and I ask you to make this intention your own. As to faith, I wish to share these thoughts on the place of the Pope in the architecture of our Catholic beliefs.

We do not believe that Popes are always wise or holy, though happily they may be. We do not think that everything a Pope says or does is divinely inspired. Popes are not coterminous with the Church; they are "of" and "for" the Church, not above her. When asked to take some decision, St John XXIII famously replied, "I am not Jesus Christ, I am only the

Pope." Yes, every Pope is "only the Pope." But he has a mission as servant of the servants of God. However frail and limited, Peter was chosen and graced by Christ to be the first of the apostles. He was the first to profess faith in Jesus. He was named the rock and holds the keys. He was told to confirm his brothers, i.e. his fellow-disciples, and to feed the sheep of Christ's flock. He was the first of the apostles to whom the risen Christ appeared, he gave the first homily in the history of the Church on Pentecost, he worked the first apostolic miracle, healing the lame man outside the temple, he was the first to open the Church to non-Jews and so turn its universality from potential to reality. He remains the first and greatest example of a weak but rescued follower of Christ. Some of this "Petrine" reality belongs simply to the beginnings of the Church, but the core of it lives on in the lawful successors of Peter, the bishops of Rome, of whom our current Holy Father Leo XIV is the 267th. The charge of the Pope is to "preside in charity" (St Ignatius of Antioch), to "lead the choir" of believers (St John Chrysostom). He is the principal teacher in and the chief pastor of the Church. When he teaches or guides or legislates authoritatively, he is to be heeded. Thus the papal ministry serves the unity of the Church; the unity of the Church enables her mission; and her mission serves the incorporation of all into the Body of Christ which is our salvation.

Some of this can seem remote from our daily preoccupations. But at another level, this gift of Christ – the Petrine ministry alive in the Pope – is vital to our faith. It is not by chance that every Catholic Mass throughout the world names the current Pope. It is a sign that every diocese, parish or community is not just a gathering of "chums", but part of something wider and greater. The Papacy saves us from a Christianity in our own image, a Christianity merely reflecting our own pet ideas or the current cultural "take" on things. The Papacy connects our "here" to everywhere the Gospel has taken root and will, and our "now" with the lasting will of Christ for his Church. The Papacy keeps all of us - laity, religious, deacons, priests and bishops - from turning in on ourselves. It preserves us from thinking that *we* define faith and "own" the Holy Spirit, and that the Church is simply ours to shape rather than first of all a saving "space" opened for us by the living Christ. With the Papacy we are spared the fate of becoming a merely national Church or a sect, or followers of some self-appointed authority. We are kept open to the fulness of the faith and the full breadth of the call to charity. With Peter the mission flourishes, without him it withers. And to refuse communion with him is spiritual suicide.

This year we keep the 50th anniversary of the canonisation of our "local hero", St John Ogilvie. He was put to death because he upheld the "spiritual jurisdiction" of the Pope. May he add his prayers to ours. May our Lady of Aberdeen ensure the triumph of reconciliation over rupture. May we be grateful recipients of God's gifts.

Yours devotedly in Christ,
+*Hugh* OSB
(Bishop of Aberdeen).