

“Where’s your head?”

Has anyone ever asked you where your head is? I have been asked that question more times than I care to admit. I also need to admit that, in such cases, my conversation partners are never satisfied with the answer “On my shoulders”, which only causes them to roll their eyes all the more. This is doubtless because they are not interested in my biology **at all**, but **only** with my psychology – that is, while they know the literal location of my head, they question its proper functioning: perhaps my comments or my actions cause them to question my reasoning ability, or maybe – as is the case lately – an avalanche of tasks and concerns causes me to be “ditzy”. Sometimes even I wonder where my head is!

One concern in particular has recently set up shop within the caverns of my cranium: the elective synod which just took place in Ukraine. As a result of what took place there, the name +Sviatoslav Shevchuk will daily be on our lips – if not in our houses, at least in our houses of prayer, where he will be commemorated at every liturgical celebration.

Who is he anyway? This very question was posed to me by one of the friars living with me at the priory. He, like many of my Dominican brothers, is totally mystified by the Ukrainian Catholic Church – not only its workings, but even its existence, but that is grist for another mill. At any rate, I told the aforementioned friar that the synod was electing the titular head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. The interrogation continued: “What do you mean by ‘titular head’?” I offered the following clarification: +Sviatoslav has the title, but Christ is the true head of the **Ukrainian Catholic** Church. After all, doesn’t St. Paul tell us that Christ is “the head of the body, the Church”? (Colossians 1:18) To claim anyone else as “head of the Church” would thus definitely be heterodox. The friar snorted and went back to his breakfast, leaving the ecclesiological musings to me.

Such musings lead me to reflect on vocabulary used to describe the relationship between Christ and His Church, especially as manifested in those chosen to bear the burden of leadership within that Church. One interesting term is “Vicar of Christ”, a title used to designate the Pope. Since he is the successor of St. Peter as Bishop of Rome, the Pope is at the summit of the hierarchical pyramid which is the Catholic Communion: all Catholics are visibly united with one another in Christ through their union with the Pope, and so I am unwavering in my embrace of the Pope and of the Communion of Catholic Churches which he leads. Nonetheless, I shudder to hear him referred to as the “Vicar of Christ”. Why? Well, a vicar is a person who replaces someone who is absent. If we say that Christ needs a vicar, that seems to imply that we think **Him** absent – a notion which strikes me as being heterodox. Doesn’t this contradict the words of Jesus, Who said to His disciples “I will be with you all days...”? (Matthew 28:20) Christ likewise assures us with the words “I will not leave you orphans” (John 14:18): Christ’s constant presence is comforting, especially on “those” days – you know which ones I mean – and having people there to remind us of that providential presence is definitely helpful.

I thus find greater comfort in the term *in Persona Christi* – i.e., “in the Person of Christ”. This phrase applies to those who – like +Sviatoslav and like Benedict XVI – are chosen to “head” Christ’s Churches; it likewise applies to bishops like +Richard who

“head” an eparchy or diocese; it even applies to pastors who “head” a parish: they need to act “in the Person of Christ”, making visible the invisible Christ who now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father. Those who act *in Persona Christi* are called upon to teach as Jesus taught while on earth, to love as Jesus loved – bringing healing to a broken world, bringing a spring thaw to frozen hearts and a flicker of hope to eyes dimmed by despair. Those who act *in Persona Christi* need to be the ears of Christ which hear the groans of the outcast, the eyes of Christ which well with tears at the sight of human suffering, the voice of Christ which calls for justice, the hands of Christ which lift the downtrodden, the feet of Christ which seek out everyone who cowers alone in dark places avoided by fearful people. Such is the fearsome vocation to which are called those who act *in Persona Christi*.

Those who “head” our Churches need to show us the way. Albert Camus reportedly said, “Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend.” Pastors take note: in the same way, the pastor needs to be *in medio Ecclesiae*, in the midst of the Church, surrounded by the people entrusted to his care and love. Like John the Baptist, pastors need eyes of faith so as to recognize **within their very communities** the One Whose sandal strap they are unworthy to loosen, proclaiming Him present for all to see. (John 1: 27, 29)

“Where’s your head?” +Sviatoslav needs to point with John the Baptist: “Behold the Lamb of God!” Show us the way for many years, Your Beatitude!

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op