

The Primacy of Peter

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rejection of papal authority and the office of the Pope. Even the Orthodox Churches recognize the Pope as the successor of St. Peter; however, they do not honor his binding jurisdiction over the whole Church but only grant him a position of "first among equals."

St. Peter's role in the New Testament further substantiates the Catholic belief concerning the papacy and what Jesus said in Matthew 16. St. Peter held a preeminent position among the apostles. He is always listed first (MT 10:1-4; MK 3:16-19; LK 6:14-16; Acts 1:13) and sometimes the only one mentioned (LK 9:32). He speaks for the apostles (MT 18:21; MK 8:28; LK 12:41; JN 6:68). When our Lord selects a group of three for some special event, such as the Transfiguration, St. Peter is in the first position. Our Lord chose St. Peter's boat to teach. At Pentecost, St. Peter preached to the crowds and told of the mission of the Church (Acts 2:14-40). He performed the first miraculous healing (Acts 3:6-7). St. Peter also received the revelation that Gentiles were to be baptized (Acts 10:9-48) and sided with St. Paul against the need for circumcision (Acts 15: 6-11). At the end of his life, St. Peter was crucified, but in his humility asked to be crucified upside down.

As Catholics, we believe that the authority given to St. Peter did not end with his life, but was handed on to his successors. The earliest writings attest to this belief. St. Irenaeus (d. 202) in his *Adversus haereses* described how

the Church at Rome was founded by St. Peter and St. Paul and traced the handing on of the office of St. Peter through Linus, Cletus (also called Anacletus), and so on through twelve successors to his own present day, Pope Eleutherius. Tertullian (d. 250) in *De praescriptione haereticorum* asserted the same point, as did Origen (d. 254) in his *Commentaries on John*, St. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) in his *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, and many others.

Granted, the expression of papal authority becomes magnified after the legalization of Christianity, and especially after the Fall of the Roman Empire and the ensuing political chaos. Nevertheless, our Church boasts of an unbroken line of legitimate successors of St. Peter who stand in the stead of Christ. We must always remember that one of the official titles of the Pope, first taken by Pope Gregory I, the Great (d. 604), is "Servant of the Servants of God." As we think of this answer, may we be mindful of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and pray for his intentions.

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A Protestant friend of mine and I recently had a debate over whether Jesus actually made St. Peter the first pope. Although I cited Matthew 16, my friend had some other interpretation of it. What is a good answer to this question?

In Catholic tradition, the foundation for the office of the pope is indeed found primarily in Matthew 16:13-20. Here Jesus asked the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The Apostles responded, "Some say John the Baptizer, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Our Lord then turned to them and point-blank asked them, "And you, who do you say that I am?"

St. Peter, still officially known as Simon, replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Our Lord recognized that this answer was grace-motivated: "No mere man has revealed this to you, but My heavenly Father."

Because of this response, our Lord said to St. Peter first, "You are 'Rock,' and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The name change itself from Simon to Peter indicates the Apostle being called to a special role of leadership; recall how Abram's name was changed to Abraham, or Jacob's to Israel, or Saul's to Paul when each of them was called to assume a special role of leadership among God's people.

The word rock also has special significance. On one hand, to be called "rock" was a Semitic expression designating the solid foundation upon which a community would be built. For instance, Abraham was considered "rock" because he was the father of the Jewish people (and we too refer to him as our father in faith) and the one with whom the covenant was first made.

On the other hand, no one except God was called specifically "rock," nor was it ever used as a proper name except for God. For instance, in Psalm 62, we pray, "Only in God is my soul at rest; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation". To give the name "rock" to St. Peter indicates that our Lord entrusted to the Apostle a special authority, an

authority which shares in and represents His own.

Some anti-papal parties try to play linguistic games with the original Greek gospel text where the masculine gender word *petros*, meaning "a small, moveable rock," refers to St. Peter while the feminine gender word *petra*, meaning "a massive, immoveable rock," refers to the foundation of the Church. However, in the Aramaic language, which is what Jesus spoke and which is believed to be the original language of St. Matthew's gospel, the word *Kepha* meaning "rock," would be used in both places without gender distinction or difference in meaning. The gender problem arises when translating from Aramaic to Greek and using the proper form to modify the masculine word *Peter* or feminine word *Church*.

The Gates of Hell is also an interesting Semitic expression. The heaviest forces were positioned at the gates; so this expression captures the great war-making power of a nation. Here this expression refers to the powers opposed to what our Lord is establishing— the Church. Jesus associated St. Peter and his office so closely with Himself that he became a visible force for protecting the Church and keeping back the power of Hell.

Second, Jesus says, "I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." In the Old Testament, the "number two" person in the Kingdom literally held the keys. In Isaiah 22:19-22 we find a reference to Eliakim, the master of

the palace of King Hezekiah and keeper of the keys. As a sign of his position, the one who held the keys represented the king, acted with his authority, and had to act in accord with the king's mind.

Moreover, in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation, Jesus holds the keys of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: "The holy One, the true, Who wields David's key, who opens and no one can close, who closes and no ones can open..." (Revelation 3:7) and "I am the First and the Last, and the One who lives. Once I was dead but now I live— forever and ever. I hold the keys of death and the nether world" (Revelation 1:17-18). St. Peter shares in an authority that penetrates to the other world.

Finally, Jesus says, "Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This is rabbinic terminology. A rabbi could bind, declaring an act forbidden or excommunicating a person for serious sin; or, a rabbi could loose declaring an act permissible or reconciling an excommunicated sinner to the community. Here Christ entrusted a special authority to St. Peter to preserve, interpret, and teach His truth.

Therefore, St. Peter and each of his successors represent our Lord on this earth as His Vicar and lead the faithful flock of the Church to the Kingdom of Heaven. This understanding of Matthew 16 was unchallenged until the Protestant leaders wanted to legitimize their