

The Primacy of Peter



The Peter Principle

To the modern mind St Peter would have been the last person Jesus would have tapped as shepherd of His flock. He was a common fisherman, impulsive and unlettered in the Jewish faith. But our ways are not God's ways. Following Simon-Peter's confession faith (Mt 16:16) Jesus grafted Simon-Peter into Himself saying, "you are Peter (which means rock) and upon this rock I will build my church." On Pentecost, Peter, with the twelve, was empowered by the Holy Spirit to lead Christ's church on earth and defend the Faith against error.

Biblical References to St Peter

"And I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock ['Peter' is Greek for 'rock'] I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (*Matt. 16:18*).

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you loose on Earth shall be loosed in heaven" (*Matt. 16:19*).

"I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (*Luke 22:32*).

Jesus chooses Peter first (*Mk 3:16-19*) (*Lk 6:14-16*).

Jesus entrusted Peter with his flock, making him too a Good Shepherd (*John 21:15-17*).

God sent an angel to Peter to announce the Resurrection of Jesus (*Mark 6:7*).

The risen Jesus first appeared to Peter (*Luke 24:34*).

Peter headed the meeting which elected Matthias as replacement for Judas (*Acts 1:13-26*).

Peter led the apostles in preaching on Pentecost (*Acts 2:14*).

Peter excommunicated Simon Magnus, a heretic (*Acts 8:21*).

Peter received the revelation to *admit* gentiles into the church (*Acts 10:44-46*).

Peter led the meeting which decided on which *terms* Gentiles would be allowed into the Church (*Acts 15:17*).

Peter was the judge of Ananias and Saphira (*Acts 5:1-11*).

Peter performed the first miracle after Pentecost (*Acts 3*).

After his conversion Paul went to see Peter, the chief apostle (*Gal. 1:18*).

Peter led first council in Jerusalem (*Acts 15*).

Peter received first converts into the church (*Acts 2:41*).

Did you know that throughout the New Testament, when the apostles are listed as a group, Peter's name is always first. Sometimes, it is just "Peter and the twelve."

Peter's name is mentioned more often than the names of all the other apostles put together.

Apostolic Succession

The Lord made Simon alone, whom he renamed Peter, the "rock" of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head." This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope. (CCC 881)



So, we can see above that the giving of the keys to Peter indicates his office, or governing position. The keys and the office denote succession. When the holder of that office ends his term another person is appointed to that position. For example, if the President of the United States dies, the presidency does not end, another takes his place. The same is true of those Christ appointed to lead His church on earth from St Peter to Pope Benedict XVI. Two hundred and sixty-five men have succeeded in an unbroken line as keeper of the keys and infallible leaders of the one, holy and apostolic Catholic Church.

The first Christians had no doubts about how to determine which was the true Church and which doctrines the true teachings of Christ. The test was simple: Just trace the apostolic succession of the claimants.

Apostolic succession is the line of bishops stretching back to the apostles. All over the world, all Catholic bishops are part of a lineage that goes back to the time of the apostles.

The role of apostolic succession in preserving true doctrine is illustrated in the Bible. To make sure that the apostles' teachings would be passed down after the deaths of the apostles, Paul told Timothy, "What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

The (Church) Fathers Know Best

St. Augustine —"Who is ignorant that the first of the apostles is the most blessed Peter?" (*Commentary on John* 56:1 [A.D. 416]).

Pope St. Leo I —"The blessed Peter persevering in the strength of the rock, which he has received, has not abandoned the helm of the Church, which he understood. For he was ordained before the rest in such a way that, from his being called the rock, from his being pronounced the foundation, from his being constituted the doorkeeper of the kingdom of heaven, from his being set as the umpire to bind and loose, whose judgments shall retain their validity in heaven, from all these mystical titles we might know the nature of his association with Christ" (*Sermons* 3:2–3 [A.D. 450]).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem —"In the power of the same Holy Spirit, Peter, both the chief of the apostles and the keeper of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, in the name of Christ healed Aeneas the paralytic at Lydia, which is now called Diospolis" [Acts 9:32–34] (*Catechetical Lectures*, 17:27 [A.D. 350]).

St. Jerome —"Simon Peter, the son of John, from the village of Bethsaida in the province of Galilee, brother of Andrew the apostle, and himself chief of the apostles, after having been bishop of the church of Antioch and having preached to the Dispersion . . . pushed on to Rome in the second year of Claudius to overthrow Simon Magus and held the sacerdotal chair there for twenty-five years until the last, that is the fourteenth, year of Nero. At his hands he received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord" (*Lives of Illustrious Men* 1 [A.D. 396]).

The Church Fathers, who are links in the chain of succession, regularly appealed to apostolic succession as a test for whether someone was teaching right doctrine. This remains necessary because heretics simply put their own interpretations on Scripture and doctrine rather than live in the heart of the Church and think with the mind of the Church. Clearly, something other than Scripture has to be used as an ultimate test of defining doctrine. This task was left by Christ to the pope and the bishops in communion with him.