

Servant of the Servants of God: St. Peter and His Successors in the Life of the Church

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” And he said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” He said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you three times deny that you know me. ~ Luke 22:31-34

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ~ Matthew 16:13-16

Simon's Confession of Faith

SIMON'S CONFESSION OF FAITH is essential to understanding his unique role in the Church. It was because of this confession that he was given the name Peter and entrusted with the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona!”* Jesus declared, *“[[f]or flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven”* (Mt 16:17-19).

Peter was “blessed” be-

cause the Father revealed to him the truth about his Son (see Mt 11:27). This truth was *foundational* and *definitive*. The faith of the whole Church depended upon and was grounded in it. Initially, and according to God's plan, it was given only to Peter. Through the Holy Spirit, he was able to profess it openly before his brother apostles. In turn, they too were blessed and given the grace to see the Lord for who he was. Thus, on the rock of Peter's faith, the apostles entered into *communion* around the only one who had the power to unite them, namely Jesus Christ. He is the Promised One, the Messiah — truly, the Son of the Living God.



Christ in Gethsemane, by Heinrich Hofmann, 1824-1911

“Peter is the Rock”

Because of his profession of faith in Christ, Simon was given a new name. In the

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Greek New Testament, this name is rendered “*Kepha*” (from Aramaic) or “*Petros*” (from Greek), both of which mean “rock.” Jesus called Simon “rock” because he intended to build his Church on Simon’s faith — a faith given him directly from the Father (see Mt 16:17). Ultimately and without a doubt, Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of the Church (see Ps 118:22; Mt 21:42; Acts 4:10-11; Eph 2:20-22; 1 Pt 2:4-8), but he chose to build the Church on the person of Peter, whose faith was essential to God’s plan.

Apostolic Authority and Succession

The role of Peter cannot be discussed without some mention of apostolic authority and succession. It is clear from Sacred Scripture that Jesus entrusted his own mission to the care of all the apostles (see Jn 13:20; Jn 17:18; Jn 20:21). He gave them authority to teach and to heal (see Mt 10:1; Mt 28:20; Lk 9:1). Furthermore, he promised to be with them until the end of time (Mt 28:20) and to send the Holy Spirit to guide them “*into all the truth*” (Jn 16:13). Hence, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus personally and permanently established apostolic authority (see 1 Cor 12:27-31; Ti 2:15). He did this in order to keep the Church united in truth and charity until “*the close of the age*” (Mt 28:20).

It is also clear from Scripture that the mission Jesus entrusted to the apostles was destined to last until the world’s end. Therefore, they passed on their unique role and authority to their closest collaborators. They accomplished this by means of the “laying on of hands” (see Acts 6:5-6; 1 Tm 5:22; 2 Tm 1:6). Today this is called ordination, that is, admission to the sacrament of Holy Orders. It signifies and brings about “apostolic succession,” the fullness of which resides in the bishops, but is shared by priests and deacons.

By the will and grace of God, apostolic authority has been preserved through an unbroken line. From the time of Peter to the present day, this authority has resided in the apostles and in their successors.



Drawing of Pope John Paul II kissing an infant, by Paul Kerrie

It is an authority to lead and govern. More importantly, it is an authority to teach in the name and the person of Christ and to sanctify. It is an authority given by Christ Jesus himself so that all in the apostles’ care may live in the assurance of truth and achieve holiness and salvation.

The Primacy

Regarding Peter specifically, those who succeed him as Bishop of Rome also inherit his unique role and authority as chief shepherd and teacher. This is expressed by the word “primacy.” It simply means that Peter and his successors enjoy the first place among the college of bishops.

Primacy has very important implications. It is tightly bound to the events that unfolded at Caesarea Philippi. Remember that the Father first revealed the whole truth about Jesus to Peter alone (see Mt 16:15-17) and, on the basis of this Revelation, Jesus entrusted Peter with the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (see Mt 16:19). It was God, therefore, who founded the authority of all the apostles on Peter. This meant that their authority was legitimate only insofar as they remained in communion with Peter’s profession of faith revealed directly by the Father himself. This is so significant that today, as then, Peter and his successors remain the perpetual source and visible sign of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole Church.

“Holy Father”

The word “pope” comes from the Latin word *papa*, which means “father.” The word “papacy,” which refers to the pope’s office as such, much like the word “presidency” refers to the office of the president, comes from the same root. The roots of these words are important because they reveal a central truth. The pope and the papacy acquire their deepest meaning and expression only within the context of a faith handed on to others in the true spirit of fatherhood. This fatherhood manifests itself best in an authentic witness to Jesus Christ before the world, faith-

ful even unto the shedding of blood. So the pope is more of a father than he is anything else. In his role as universal shepherd, he is charged by Christ with the task of feeding, guiding, teaching, and defending the People of God (see Lk 22:31-32; Jn 21:15-17). Catholics, then, are not afraid to call him “father,” or even “Holy Father” because by virtue of his office, that is precisely who he is. His office is sacred (holy) and his role is paternal (fatherly).

The Pope is Human

At the same time, Catholics are equally unafraid to acknowledge that the pope is a human being. He is imperfect. Peter, too, was human and imperfect, possessing all the strengths and weaknesses of human existence. Jesus prays for Peter “that [his] faith may not fail” (Lk 22:32), because he knows the depths of human weakness. Jesus knows that Peter will deny him; it is not a question of “if” (see Mk 14:30-31, 66-72).

In spite of Peter’s denial, Jesus does not reject him (see Jn 21:15-17). While fully aware of human weakness, he is equally aware of the concrete possibilities of this man. He continued to value Peter’s confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi and led him patiently through his Passion and death and beyond his denial. This valuing of Peter’s profession of faith ultimately extends to his successors. They must also face human failings while continuing to proclaim the truth about Jesus to the Church and to the whole human family.

All of this is central, because it is not simply a question of the man Peter or the one who succeeds him. Chiefly, it is a question of the will of the Father (see Mt 16:17) and the work of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:4, 14). It is a question of Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone and the one who builds his Church on Peter and all the apostles.

The Pope: A Work of the Holy Spirit

Following the Resurrection, and despite Peter’s denial, Jesus confirms Peter’s primacy over the

whole Church, asking him “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21:15). Peter, who had not stopped loving Jesus, responds: “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (Jn 21:16). “Feed my lambs ... Tend my sheep,” the Lord commands him (Jn 21:15-16).

In this light, we see that for Jesus, Peter’s primacy is not a question of his human strengths or weaknesses. Peter does not repeat what he stated before the Crucifixion: “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Mt 26:35). It is not a question of that. By then, it had become a question of the Spirit of God, promised by Christ to the one who would take his place on earth. Despite his imperfection, Peter was chosen to stand in for Christ. His election became a question of the *concrete possibilities* of humanity redeemed in Christ.

In this regard, perhaps it is enough to remember that on the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who first spoke to those gathered in Jerusalem. Peter reminded them of the crime committed against Jesus (see Acts 2:14-41). By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus could be confident in Peter’s witness to the truth. He could, as it were, rely on Peter as his vicar on earth and on all the apostles — even on Paul, who at that time continued to persecute the Church and hated the name of Jesus. This trust and confidence on the part of Jesus continues to bear witness to the charism of infallibility possessed by the pope and the bishops in communion with him.

Servant of the Servants of God

To conclude, it is important to see the pope’s role and presence in the Church as a necessary and fundamental *service* to the whole Body of Christ. In fact, without this *primary service of obedience to the truth*, the Church’s unity — so integral to the Church — could not be guaranteed. Therefore, the pope is also called “Servant of the Servants of God.” His role is ministry (service), to be carried out in the name of and in the person of Christ for the good of all.

(CCC 85, 551-553, 861-862, 874-896, 1559, 2034)

“For Jesus, Peter’s primacy is not a question of his human strengths or weaknesses.”



Pope St. Pius X, the first 20th century pope to be declared a saint