

### Upon this Rock

Last month we looked at some of the scriptural foundations of the authority of the Catholic Church, as being the Church that Christ himself built on St Peter as the rock foundation, and to which he promised the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit of truth. Today we'll look in more depth at Jesus' words to Peter, and also at some of the testimony of the early Church on the Popes, the Bishops of Rome, as Successors of Peter.

We recall that it was Jesus who gave Simon the nickname 'Peter' – *Rock*. At their very first meeting, 'Jesus looked at him and said "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).' (*Jn* 1:42) In Jesus' own language, Aramaic, the word for 'rock' is *kepha*, carried into the Gospels (which were written in Greek) as *Cephas*. The actual Greek word for 'rock' is *petra* – given a masculine form, *Petros* in order to be a man's name, which then became *Peter* in English. Putting it simply: all these words just mean 'Rock'.

Only later does Jesus explain why he changed Simon's name to 'Rock': 'You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell 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* 16:18-19) In his native Aramaic, Jesus would have said, 'You are *kepha*, and on this *kepha* I will build my Church': the very same word for 'Peter' and 'Rock'. So Simon Peter is himself the Rock.

Jesus is saying he will make Peter the rock solid foundation supporting and uniting his People. In himself, Peter is a weak and sinful man, but Jesus will share his own strength with Peter: Jesus is the 'deeper' rock on whom Peter himself depends. (cf. *1 Cor* 10:4) We might also loosely say Peter's faith is the rock (which leads to the same conclusion in the end). Thus Jesus tells Simon Peter at the Last Supper: 'I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.' (*Lk* 22:32)

'The gates of hell' [Greek: *Hades* – the underworld, the realm of the dead] means the powers of death and evil. Jesus promises that these forces will never defeat his Church which he builds on Peter: it will last continuously until Jesus returns in glory. Christ will be with her 'to the end of time' (*Mt* 28:20).

As for the 'keys of the kingdom', from other teachings of Jesus (see e.g. *Mt* 13:24-50) we know that the 'kingdom of heaven' begins even in the Church here on earth, which is the seed of the Heavenly Kingdom. In the Bible the 'keys' are a symbol of having control and authority (see *Is* 22:22; *Rev* 3:7). So by entrusting Peter with the 'keys of the kingdom of heaven', Jesus gives him authority to guide the Church on earth.

Finally, among the rabbis 'binding' and 'loosing' meant forbidding and permitting – that is, making laws. So when Jesus says 'whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven', he means that the rulings Peter makes for the Church on earth, God will 'ratify' in heaven. (We might really say, God's guidance is over the rulings in the first place.)

From early Christian writings we learn that St Peter went to Rome and became its Bishop (alongside St Paul), and in the end he was crucified by the Roman Empire. Now, one would

hardly expect Jesus to set up such an imposing authority as he gave Peter, only to let it lapse with his death – especially in view of the need (as we saw last month) for an infallible guide to unite Christians in the truth of the one apostolic Faith. So we find the early Church, guided by the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised, understanding that those succeeding St Peter as Bishop of Rome – the Popes – also inherit, by God’s law, his leadership over the whole Church.

We sample a few testimonies (recalling that obviously St Peter didn’t immediately go and set up the Vatican as we now have it. As with all doctrines, the full understanding and expression of the teaching only deepens gradually over the centuries.)

So St Irenaeus writes in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century: ‘We do put to confusion all those who... assemble in unauthorised meetings... by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organised at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul... For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority.’ (*Adv. haeres.* 3, 3, 2)

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century St Jerome writes to Pope St Damasus I: ‘As I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none but your blessedness, that is with the chair of Peter. For this, I know, is the rock on which the Church is built! ... This is the ark of Noah, and he who is not found in it shall perish when the flood prevails.’ (*Letters* 15:2)

In the same era we have the words of St Ambrose: ‘Where Peter is, there is the Church.’ (*Comm. on Twelve Psalms* 40:30) And at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Bishops acclaimed the doctrinal statement of Pope St Leo the Great with the words, ‘Peter has spoken through Leo!’

In 517 the *Rule of Pope Hormisdas* was subscribed to by the Bishops of the Eastern Church (sometimes viewed as less receptive of papal authority): ‘We cannot pass over the statement of our Lord Jesus Christ who said: “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church”... these [words] which were spoken, are proved by the effects of the deeds, because in the Apostolic See [Rome] the Catholic religion has always been preserved without stain... I hope that I may merit to be in the one communion with you, which the Apostolic See proclaims, in which there is the whole and the true and the perfect solidity of the Christian religion.’

We close with 7<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine theologian, St Maximus the Confessor (*Opuscula theo.*): ‘The extremities of the earth, and everyone in every part of it who purely and rightly confess the Lord, look directly towards the Most Holy Roman Church and her confession and faith, as to a sun of unfailing light... From the descent of the Incarnate Word amongst us, all the churches in every part of the world have held the greatest Church alone to be their base and foundation, seeing that, according to the promise of Christ Our Saviour, the gates of hell have never prevailed against her, that she has the keys of the orthodox confession and right faith in Him.’