

SAINT PETER AND THE PAPACY

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To understand Saint Peter, we must go back to the beginning of when and how He was chosen by the Lord. This initial calling will have a significant impact on his future role as the Vicar of Christ.

Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen by trade. They were simple men casting their nets, minding their own business, when one day Jesus walks by, sees them and calls them,

"Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men".

Both of them immediately followed Him. Neither one of them knew what this following would entail or how their lives were (from now on) going to be changed forever.

What an impact Jesus' presence must have had in them, that once He called them, they abandoned everything, and without any hesitation left it all behind to follow the "Master."

His holy existence was enough for these two men (and many others) to follow Him.

From that moment on, Saint Peter never left Jesus' side. He listened to Him, questioned Him, learned from Him, denied Him, and loved Him with all his heart. Saint Peter was with Him when He performed His many miracles, in particular (the feeding of the five thousand) which is the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. Peter's own mother-in-law was cured by our Lord.

Saint Peter was an eye-witness to Jesus' many miracles. He saw him when He was walking on water, then Saint Peter doubted for a moment and he began to sink, asking the Lord to save him. And, Jesus response to him 'man of little faith'.

Saint Peter had numerous opportunities (to be close to Jesus) to see first-hand what his (unknown) worldwide mission would be like. He would have to be a Shepherd of souls, a leader for the disciples and for so many, a preacher of God's Kingdom of all he has seen and heard, etc.

Jesus began to prepare his disciples for when he was no longer going to be with them. He needed to make sure they were men of strong faith with secure and solid convictions. Then come the memorable words of our Lord Jesus Christ, when He said to Saint Peter: *"You are Peter, and upon this rock I shall build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* (Mt 16:18-19)

With those preeminent words (spoken directly) by our Lord, the Papacy of the Catholic Church began.

"Who first founded the Catholic Church? Jesus Christ. That's right. The Big Guy Himself, before He ascended into heaven, left us a Church, with a visible leader, the pope. The Church isn't just a human reality. She's also a divine reality. She has ties not only in this world but in the world to come." ¹

Saint Peter was constantly first in authority. The apostles have always looked up to Him as the main Leader. When they were worried, scared, or anxious, they will consistently turn to Saint Peter. There is no questioning he was preferred among the disciples.



It is important to mention that Saint Peter went through much suffering. He couldn't forgive himself for denying our Lord three times, right after he had told our Lord that he would be willing to die for him. We know that our Lord forgave him. Then our Lord offered him the opportunity to tell Him how much He loved Him by asking him (precisely three times) if he loved Him, with the famous words: "Peter, do you love me?" Our Lord knew that by asking Saint Peter three times this question, it was going to heal him from his grief of denying Him.

Saint Peter was arrested several times by the high priests. They wanted to stop him from preaching and baptizing people into the Christian faith.

The first time He ever preached three-thousand persons embraced the faith and were baptized. Saint Peter died a martyr for the faith, and he didn't consider himself worthy to die as our Lord did, so he asked to be crucified (upside down). Saint Peter is known as the Prince of the Apostles (and this is a title which is well-deserved of this humble/sinful man) who loved our Lord with all his strength (despite his human weaknesses and shortcomings).

It is important to understand Saint Peter, in order to love him. All of us (at different points in our lives) can relate to him. We can identify with him in his struggles, in his fears, his courage, his love for the Lord, his zeal for the conversion of sinners, his love for Mary, his persuasive directness, and his blind faith.

This is the man God chose to become the first pope (the Vicar of Christ on earth) of the Catholic Church (and yet while he was with Him, he was clueless of who he was going to develop into). The Lord prepared Saint Peter to be (who he was meant to be) a responsible leader to feed the Lord's sheep.

Jesus chose Saint Peter the Apostle to be the foundation of His Church. Notwithstanding, it is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church through the Servant of the Servants of God.

"Catholics sometimes say the Pope steps into "the shoes of the fisherman," meaning that he follows Saint Peter, who was a fisherman before being called by Jesus Christ to lead the church."²

Saint Peter is the one who recognizes the Lord as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He is the one who is recorded more than any other disciple. He was also present at the Transfiguration of our Lord, along with James and John. He baptized Cornelius and he also cut the right ear of Malchus trying to defend our Lord. Saint Peter is indeed one and only. He had a simple, pure, unattached heart and the Lord looked right into it and right into his eyes and all Saint Peter could say was: "Master." Undeniably He was his "Master"

Saint Peter had a mission (as well as the other apostles) to spread the good news throughout the world and to baptize people in Jesus' name. Nevertheless, our Lord (in a very special way) confided to Saint Peter the keys to His Kingdom and to faithfully lead his followers.

The Roman Petrine Succession is the unbroken line of papal succession from Saint Peter to our present pope. There have been 266 popes in the 2,000 plus-year history of the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict XVI was the 264th successor of Saint Peter, which made him the 265th pope of the Catholic Church. Pope Francis (our current pope) is number 266.

"Just as the office which the Lord confided to Peter alone, as first of the apostles, destined to be transmitted to his successors, is a permanent one, so also endures the office, which the apostles received, of shepherding the Church, a charge destined to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of bishops. Hence the Church teaches that 'the bishops have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church', in such wise that whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and him who sent Him."³

This is crystal clear. Christ wanted to make sure his mission will continue after His death. Therefore, He authorized His apostles to carry forward His mission, who in turned were succeeded by the Bishops. This is what is known as the Papacy.

"The papacy is the term for the office and the authority of the pope of Rome, the successor to Saint Peter as bishop of Rome and head of the universal Church. Also called "the pontiff," "the Holy Father," and "the Vicar of Christ," the pope is the spiritual head of all Christendom and a visible symbol of unity in the Church."⁴

The early Church encountered many challenges as it tried to be faithful and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and His apostles. There were many disagreements in the Church over certain teachings. There were many tensions during the Middle Ages between the Eastern and the Western Church. Needless to say, the Papacy of the Church stood strongly through it all.

"The Church's failures have extended even to the bishops. Judas Iscariot was a bishop! It has been extended to some of her popes. We have not had a wicked pope for centuries, but there were some in the Renaissance. And, sometimes their sins have been spectacular, for example, during the Borgia papacy, when some of the popes were essentially Mafia godfathers. All these things are of course utterly inexcusable scandals and outrages. But divine providence always kept the magisterium pure despite the sins of the teachers." No pope who lived in sin ever decreed that popes were allowed to act in such a way. Popes who disbelieved in the creeds never wrote a word to deny or compromise any of them."⁵

No matter how bad the members of the Church were, she remained infallible. And, this is where Papal Infallibility comes into play. This is one of the teachings of the Catholic faith which is generally misunderstood by those who do not share our faith. They believed it means that the Pope cannot sin. This, of course, is not the true meaning of papal infallibility.

"Infallibility is not the absence of sin. Nor is it a charism that belongs only to the pope. Indeed, infallibility also belongs to the body of bishops as a whole, when, in doctrinal unity with the pope, they solemnly teach a doctrine as true. We have this from Jesus himself, who promised the apostles and their successors the bishops, the magisterium of the Church: "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16), and "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).⁶

Papal Infallibility belongs in a special way to the Pope. It is not a doctrine that just appeared from one day to the next (as many of our protestant brothers mistakenly believe). It has existed since the early Church. Our understanding of it has become more clear over time. This has been a hot topic in apologetic debates as well.

"As Vatican II remarked, it is a charism the pope "enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith (Luke 22:32), he proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals. Therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly held irreformable, for they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, an assistance promised to him in blessed Peter."⁷

In the history of the Church, there has been twenty-one ecumenical (worldwide) councils in the Church. Usually, church councils were convened in order to clarify our beliefs. The most recent ones were Vatican Council One and the Second Vatican Council. Both were held in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. And, it is precisely the Pope (the one) who presides over the council.

"In 1545 the Catholic Church called a council to address the issues promulgated by the Protestant reformers. The decisions made at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) were to have lasting effects within the Roman Catholic Church and with its relationship to Protestantism and Anglicanism for the next four hundred years. The Council of Trent reiterated Catholic teaching in several doctrine areas, and it reaffirmed papal supremacy."⁸

Pope John XXIII was the one who convened the Second Vatican Council, and Pope Paul VI concluded it. Needless to say, this was a phenomenal Council (filled with profound and enriching documents). It also allowed for the vernacular to be used (meaning each country could use their own language, instead of the Latin, when celebrating Holy Mass).

"By Augustine's day, the authority of the bishop of Rome was well established. None of them attended any of the great councils, although they sent legates, their absence dictated partly by the difficulties of travel but perhaps primarily by their understanding of their office as not that of one bishop among many but as supreme over all. In determining which councils were authentic and which one were not, the judgment of the see of Rome was always crucial."⁹

Many of our protestant brothers and sisters misunderstand the role of the Papacy, they believe that the Catholic Church added the doctrine of the Papacy to God's Word when we claim that Saint Peter had a special authority over the others. But this is erroneous. No one has invented anything or added/deleted anything to God's Word.

"There are an overwhelming number of scriptural episodes that point to a special primacy among the apostles that Saint Peter had. For one thing, whenever the apostles are all listed by name as a group, he is always first. We see phrases such as "Peter and the others," which indicate that it was understood that Simon Peter represented the college of apostles."¹⁰

The Catholic Faith has always been and continues to be transparent, no hidden agendas, no hidden secrets (as many claim we have). We have always taught the truth revealed to us by our Lord Jesus Christ (who is God Himself). Our Church was founded by Jesus Christ, no other Church can claim that.

The Papacy is a truth that many (who aren't Catholics) continue to struggle with (mainly because of misunderstandings) of what the Papacy is all about. But also because they don't quite understand the role of the Pope, who He is and what He does.

Many throughout the centuries have always wondered why is the Pope so important to the Catholic world. Sadly but true, so many mistakenly believe we worship the Pope, when in reality the only one we really worship is our One, True God in three Divine Persons (the Most Holy Trinity).

The Pope is known by many titles, such as the Bishop of Rome, the head of the Universal Church, the Spiritual leader of all Catholics worldwide. He exercises his authority as the successor of Saint Peter, the first pope. Together, the pope and the Bishops (in communion with him) lead and teach the Catholic faithful in matters of faith and morals. The word 'pope' comes from the Latin word 'papa'. As the Bishop of Rome, He has primacy over all the other bishops in the Catholic Church. His leadership is unequalled.

"It was to Peter that Christ called to come out of the boat and walk on water. It was from Simon Peter's fishing boat that Christ preached to the crowds that pressed against him on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. St. John deferred to Peter at the tomb, even though he was younger and ran there faster than Peter, waiting for Peter to enter ahead of him. It was to Simon Peter, first among all the apostles, that Christ's resurrection was revealed and the first among the apostles to whom Christ appeared after His resurrection."¹¹

The Pope is a spiritual father to all Catholics all over the world. The Pope is first and foremost a priest, and just like any priest He celebrates the sacraments, offers spiritual guidance, and challenges all Catholics to live holy lives. He preaches the Word of God by word and deed.

"On any given day, the pope may be briefed about the latest violence in the Middle East, about Muslim-Christian slaughter in Indonesia. Then he will be expected to make decisions. If he does too little, he will be accused of indifference; if he does too much, he will be accused of meddling. The pope must be a skilled public figure who knows how to use, rather than be used by, the global communications industry. If he shrinks from publicity, they will say he is weak; if he courts it, they will say he's an egomaniac."¹²

No matter what He does or say, the Pope will always be either praised or criticized. Popes usually bear the burden of their office until they die or they resign (just as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI did at the beginning of this year).

If Saint Peter (the first pope) would not have been so important, why would Christ go through all the trouble of doing everything He did (with and) for Saint Peter? If he would have been just one more regular, ordinary

man, why would Christ delegate to him such a decisive undertaking. Christ did it because He wanted to give (and He gave) Saint Peter an exceptional role among the apostles. Christ needed Saint Peter to be the leader of His flock, the Shepherd of His sheep. This was God's desire.

And, this makes total sense, everyone needs a leader to follow, more so (one) in the Church which Jesus Christ founded. Christ knew His Church was going to need someone who will be able to guide it. Someone who will be able to give it all (in order to make sure) His Church will grow and reach out to all humanity, throughout the earth. This is why He chose Saint Peter.

"The word church itself comes from a Greek word meaning "belonging to the Lord." We belong to the Lord because we are attached to him as a body to a head. As the head of the Church, Christ gives the body direction and vision. The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church. The Spirit lives in the baptized and provides the necessary gifts to be holy, alive, and Christ-like. Without Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, there would be no Church."¹³

Another interesting fact is that Saint Peter was in Jerusalem with Mary, the Mother of God, (and the other apostles) the day of Pentecost. Pentecost has always been known as the "birthday of the Church." Saint Peter was always a key player in special moments. All of the apostles were gathered together (united) in the Upper Room. Most likely, they were scared of being arrested or killed, yet they knew they had to stay together (united as One Body), and this is how our Church began.

Perhaps when we look at Saint Peter (in the eyes of the world), he may not have been the best candidate in the universe to be the Vicar of Christ for His Church here on earth. We can be certain that with today's standards and worldly mentality, he would just have been a simple fisherman, incapable of any major accomplishments. But, fortunately, our Lord doesn't think like we do. He thinks totally different.

And, He chooses the weak to show forth His power, and to show the wise and the learned that His wisdom is not from this world, but rather that it comes from above. And, He is free to give it to whomever He desires.

He chose Saint Peter to leave us a great example of what God can do to a human person (if he allows His heart to be transformed by His power). Saint Peter's weaknesses became his strengths, not by any human means (but rather by God's loving power).

In conclusion, the Papacy is unique. It belongs exclusively to the Catholic Church. It is a gift from above. The papacy was instituted by Christ when he told St. Peter that, "upon this rock, I will build my Church." It would take us a lifetime to refer to each papacy of each particular pope, but some are worth mentioning briefly, such as the papacy of Pope Paul VI was a time of marked change in the Church and the world. His encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was spectacular, yet so many found it to be controversial because it rejects artificial methods of birth control. Indeed a sincere, loving document expressing the true teachings of the Magisterium of the Church.

The papacy of Blessed John Paul II is still very much alive and present with us and will continue to be for generations to come. His fruits of his papacy are still reaping. Finally, the nine month papacy of Pope Francis has touched and moved millions of hearts all over the world.

It is such an undeserved privilege to be Catholics, what a gift we have in the Papacy!

¹ Bonacci, Mary Beth "We're on a Mission from God - The Generation X Guide to John Paul II, the Catholic Church and the Real Meaning of Life". Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1996 - Page 33

² Allen, Jr. John L, " Conclave - The Politics, Personalities, and Process of the Next Papal Election" Doubleday Publishing, Broadway, New York, 2002, Page 8

³ The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, New York, 1994, # 862

⁴ Richert, Scott P. "The Papacy of the Catholic Church" Online Article http://catholicism.about.com/od/organization/p/The_Papacy.htm

⁵ Kreeft, Peter J. and Tacelli, Ronald K. "Handbook of Catholic Apologetics - Reasoned Answers to Questions of Faith" Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2009, Page 432

⁶ Catholic Answers - To explain and defend the faith - Online Article on Papal Infallibility
<http://www.catholic.com/tracts/papal-infallibility>

⁷ Catholic Answers - To explain and defend the faith - Online Article on Papal Infallibility
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⁸ Clemmons, Nancy, SNJM, "Exploring the Religions of Our World" Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2008, Page 95

⁹ Hitchcock, James "History of the Catholic Church - From the Apostolic Age to the Third Millennium" Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2012, Pg. 97

¹⁰ Patrick Madrid - Answer Me This ! - Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Huntington, Indiana, 2003, Pg. 106

¹¹ Patrick Madrid, Answer Me This ! - Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Huntington, Indiana, 2003, Pg. 107

¹² Allen, Jr. John L, " Conclave - The Politics, Personalities, and Process of the Next Papal Election" Doubleday Publishing, Broadway, New York, 2002, Page 9

¹³ Amodei, Michael "Catholic Essentials - An Overview of the Faith" Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2009, Page 148

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Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...



Return to main page
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