



THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

HIS HOLINESS, POPE FRANCIS
THE 265TH SUCCESSOR OF SAINT PETER



TU ES PETRUS

The American Pope is the Pastor of the Universal Church

Why is St. Peter considered the chief of the apostles, endowed with complete authority in Christ's Church? Moreover, why is the bishop of Rome called the successor of Peter, and therefore, "head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ, and the pastor of the universal Church on earth"?

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Matthew 16:13-19

Thus the Catechism states:

Jesus entrusted a specific authority to Peter: "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." The "power of the keys" designates authority to govern the house of God, which is the Church. ...The power to "bind and loose" connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church. Jesus entrusted this authority to the Church through the ministry of the apostles, and in particular through the ministry of Peter, the only one to whom he specifically entrusted the keys of the kingdom. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §553.

Indeed, after Simon Peter declares his faith in Jesus as Christ, our Lord discloses his royal destiny: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised" (Mt. 16:21). What a paradox! Christ Jesus, in whom God's kingdom "stands firm forever," is the Crucified King; the "son of David" is king of lepers, miscreants, outcasts, sinners, and fools ... and Peter is his vicar! Unsurprisingly, Peter rejects this as Pope Francis, in his Mass for the Church in the Sistine Chapel, recalls,

“In the Gospel, even Peter who confessed Jesus as Christ, says to Him: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. I will follow you but let's not talk about the Cross. That doesn't have anything to do with it. ... I'll follow you, without the Cross. But, when we walk without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess a Christ without the Cross ... we aren't disciples of the Lord. We are worldly, we are bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.’”

Pope Francis continued encouraging the Cardinals, and all of us to profess the glory of Christ Crucified because this is the work of the Church. After the Resurrection, the Lord reaffirms Peter's authority, by telling him, “Feed my sheep” (John 21: 17). And then Jesus tells Peter that he will imitate Christ's own crucifixion. Like the Good Shepherd, Peter would lay down his life for the sheep.

St. Peter is believed to have evangelized and founded churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean after leaving Jerusalem. However, according to the tradition of the Church, East and West, the First Disciple was martyred at Rome, bound to an inverted (head downward) cross, during the mid- to late 60s A.D. The significance of St. Peter's death at Rome cannot be underestimated; the Church of Rome enjoys primacy among the churches of God because Christian tradition has identified Rome as the site where the Apostle Peter gave his life in imitation of his Crucified Lord: indeed, the high altar of the Basilica of St. Peter at the Vatican marks the spot under which his bones rest (literally, the church is built upon Peter!). Furthermore, to add to Rome's honor, St. Paul too, was martyred within its precincts; the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls designates where he was laid to rest.

Beyond doubt, Rome's "preeminent authority" is her faith, baptized in the blood of her illustrious martyrs (including many of the earliest bishops of Rome), with Peter as the first martyred pope.

In his first words spoken from the loggia, Pope Francis stated

“And now let us begin this journey, the Bishop and the people, this journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches, a journey of brotherhood in love, of mutual trust. Let us always pray for one another. Let us pray for the whole world that there might be a great sense of brotherhood.”

While Pope Francis recognizes his role as a successor of Peter as the Bishop of Rome, he is also the Shepherd of the universal Church and he presides over it in charity in a communion of brotherhood. Certainly there is a hierarchy, but this hierarchy is ordered by love, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope is a servant of communion.

Tu es Petrus: So the choir chants at the Inauguration Ceremony of a new pope. Notice, the Bishop of Rome is not the successor of the man who preceded him in office, but the Successor of Peter ... indeed, he is mystically identified with St. Peter himself. Why is this so?

As indicated earlier, our Lord builds his Church, God's Kingdom, upon the Rock of Peter's person and faith. St. Peter, then (along with Ss. James, John, Paul, and the other Apostles), remains the Church's perpetual foundation. Moreover, as chief steward of the Kingdom, St. Peter's vocation is unique and irreplaceable. However, his office (or function) and

chair (or teaching and ruling authority) continue to exist on earth. In this sense, then, the popes, the bishops of Rome, are "Successors of Peter." In other words, his successors are tasked with the chief stewardship of God's Church on earth only insofar as they remain in Peter's office and upon his chair. Typically, then, it is only through death that a pope is discharged of his responsibilities. However, as we have seen on occasion throughout history (and most recently, during the pontificate of Benedict XVI), it is possible for the pope to relinquish, freely, his responsibilities as Successor of Peter, and "transfer" them to the next bishop of Rome.

Ultimately, the mystery of St. Peter and the papacy is, from start to finish, the mystery of the service of Christian love, even to the point of humiliation, even unto the Cross. The privileges and responsibilities of St. Peter (and, by extension, his successors) are utterly meaningless outside this context; after all, they are special shares in the Mystery of Christ, who gave "his life as a ransom for many."

It is for this reason that every man called to the papal ministry (again, without exception) is called to become, par excellence, the very icon of Crucified Love. Likewise, if he is granted unique privileges and responsibilities, it is so that he might serve every member of Christ's Body in our journey to transformation in Christ Crucified, in self-giving/sacrificing Love.

“Have the courage to walk in the Way of the Lord with the Cross of the Lord.”

- Pope Francis

