

There are examples of Peter exercising his leadership in the **Acts of the Apostles** (1:15-26; 5:1-11; 11:1-18); however, the best witness to Apostolic Succession and the Papacy can be found in the early Christian writings. An early witness to papal authority is the **Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians**. This letter was written 96 A.D. in Rome by Pope Clement to restore order to the church in Corinth. Clement not only interferes with this church, but also apologizes for not acting sooner. In 190 A.D., St. Irenaeus of Lyons lists the Bishops of Rome (Popes) in his book, **Against Heresies**:

*The blessed apostles, then having founded and built the Church (in Rome), committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate...To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric...In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome despatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians...To this Clement there succeeded Evaristus. Alexander followed Evaristus; then...Sixtus (the list continues)... In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. [Against Heresies III, 3, 3]*

In 325 A.D., Eusebius of Caesarea, writes **The History of the Church** and quotes St. Irenaeus' list (V, 6). Eusebius also cites **1 Peter** 5:13 as proof that St. Peter was in Rome, a.k.a. Babylon (II, 15).

Peter's primacy is evident from the Bible; his name is always first in the lists of the Apostles (Matt. 10:1-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13). Apostolic Succession was a fact of life in the early Church, as witnessed by the early Christian writings. The primacy of the present Pope is based on faith in Christ's promise, that His Church built on Peter will not be overcome by the power of death (Matt. 16:18; 7:25).

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#### **Pamphlet 234**

## **St. Peter and the Popes**

Phillip B. Liescheski

*Jesus looked intently at Peter for a moment and then said, "You are Simon, John's son - but you shall be called Peter, the rock!"*

John 1:42

Some Christians deny that the Pope, as successor of St. Peter, has any special authoritative role in the Church founded by Christ. Some claim that according to the Bible, St. Peter never served as the leader of the Church. Others may recognize his special authority, but deny Apostolic Succession, the passing on of this office by the Church.

This challenge for a Catholic Christian should begin with these Gospel verses:

*And I tell you, you are Peter (Petros), and on this rock (petra) 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. [Matt. 16: 18-19, RSV]*

Through the centuries many things have been written about these two verses; however, only a few points will be considered here.

First Jesus promises that the destructive "power of death shall not prevail against" His Church. This verse, especially in light of

**Matt.** 28:19-20 and **2 Tim.** 2:2, suggests Apostolic Succession, the passing on of the discipleship to faithful men through the centuries, since Christ's original disciples were mortal men. Secondly in verse 19, St. Peter is the only person to whom Jesus promises to give the keys of His kingdom. In the Bible, keys are a sign of authority (Isaiah 22:22; Rev. 1:18; 3:7). If you have ever accidentally been locked out of the house or car, you probably experienced the power of keys! Thirdly in verse 18, Christ gives Simon the name Peter, meaning rock, and promises that His Church will be built "on this rock." In the original Greek text, *petra* is used for rock, while *Petros* is used for Peter. In Greek, nouns have gender. *Petra*, being the common Greek noun for rock, has a feminine gender and thus is not appropriate for a man's name. To make it suitable for Simon, *petra* is given a masculine ending, resulting in *Petros*, Peter in Greek.

Elsewhere in the Bible, Simon Peter is also called *Cephas* (or *Kephas*). *Cephas* is from the word for ROCK in Aramaic, the language Jesus and the Apostles commonly spoke. In **John** 1:42, Jesus renames Simon as *Cephas*:

*"So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).* [John 1:42]

The footnote to this verse in the RSV Bible states: "From the word for rock in Aramaic and Greek respectively." **The Living Bible**, a Protestant paraphrased edition, actually renders this verse as: "...but you shall be

*called Peter, the rock!"*(see top) If Jesus did not establish St. Peter as the foundation rock of the Church, then it is quite strange that Jesus renamed him ROCK in two different languages!

Jesus and His Apostles were fluent in Scripture. In **Matt.** 16:19, Jesus is making reference to the rite of succession found in the **Book of Isaiah**:

*In that day I (God) will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and I will ... commit your (Shebna's) authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.* [Isaiah 22:20-22]

In verses 15-25, Eliakim is succeeding Shebna in the office of prime ministry. Eliakim is not a king but a prime minister under King Hezekiah (Isaiah 36:1-3, 22). The king of the Davidic dynasty had ministers who helped in governing (2 Sam. 8:15-18; 20:23-26). Likewise Jesus, being the King in the house of David (Luke 1:32-33), appoints St. Peter as His first prime minister by giving him "the keys of the kingdom."

It should be noted that Jesus in **Matt.** 16:18-19 speaks in the future tense, as in a promise. Jesus at this point does not confer authority to St. Peter, so his later denial of Christ does not render it void. Christ actually prays for St. Peter before his denial: "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."* [Luke 22:31-32]

It is only after this trial that Christ confers authority onto St. Peter in **John** 21.

The imagery in **John** 21 is different. Jesus is not referred to as King but as the Good Shepherd. In **John** 10:16 Jesus speaks of "one flock and one shepherd." From the text it is obvious that the flock is the Church, while Jesus is the shepherd. Now in **John** 21:15-19, Jesus gives His earthly authority to St. Peter by telling him: "Simon, son of John...Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep." Jesus is not telling St. Peter to literally feed a flock of sheep but to guide and care for His Church on earth.

A common objection against Peter's primacy is based on **Gal.** 2:11-14 where St. Paul rebukes St. Peter (*Cephas*) for acting insincerely. This rebuke from St. Paul does not undermine St. Peter's teaching authority, since St. Paul did not rebuke him for false teaching but for setting a bad example. (As an aside, St. Paul also set a bad example in **Acts** 16:3.) It must be remembered that St. Peter was a sinner like the rest of us (Luke 5:8,10). Likewise Nathan's condemnation of King David in **2 Sam.** 12 did not undermine David's ruling authority but brought him to repentance. Finally, if St. Paul did not recognize St. Peter's teaching authority, then why did he spend fifteen days with Peter (*Cephas*) during his early ministry (Gal. 1:18)?