

‘And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church.’

Mt 16:18

Today’s feast of Ss Peter & Paul is not only a celebration of the two great Apostles of Rome – St Peter, her first bishop, and St Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles – but also an affirmation of our faith in the Catholic Church Herself. ‘Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.’

This very phrase alone demonstrates how necessary it is to have a hierarchical Church which bears the authority of Our Lord. After all, who is to say what this verse from the Gospel means? Should each congregational gathering or each individual be empowered to proclaim what these words mean? Will we not then end up with as many interpretations as there are people trying to interpret it?

But from the earliest times, the Catholic Church has upheld the primacy of Peter. Throughout the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles, and even in the Letters of St Paul, Peter’s primacy – his leadership not only of the group of Twelve Apostles but his leadership of the whole Christian community – is asserted again and again.

Having written the fourth Gospel, St John went on to instruct St Polycarp, who in turn had as one of his pupils, St Irenæus. In his book, *Against the Heresies*, St Irenæus upheld the already established principle that St Peter and the Church in Rome held supremacy over the whole of Christendom. If we want to know what the Catholic Church teaches, then look to Rome. But even before St Irenæus, both St Ignatius of Antioch – St Peter’s successor as Bishop of that city after St Peter went to Rome – and Tertullian, a theologian priest in Carthage, had already upheld the primacy of Peter. In other words, this doctrine goes back to the very beginning.

So what does ‘the power of the keys’ mean?

When a pope is elected, he immediately assumes *full, supreme, and universal* authority over all things pertaining to the teaching, the practices, and the governance of the Catholic Church. A pope ranks higher even than a General Ecumenical Council: even a Council's teachings hold no sway until they have been ratified and promulgated by the pope.

The pope's job is to defend, uphold, and proclaim all that God has revealed. So, whilst no pope is subject to any higher authority here on earth, nonetheless this does not mean that he can simply do what he likes. Popes are obliged to operate within the framework that Tradition – with a capital T – has already established. Whilst a pope may oversee organic and gradual growth and development – a bit like a gardener pruning plants or staking them so that they grow straight and upright – he may not sow new seeds that Our Lord Himself has not already planted. But even when tending the vine, a gardener must prune with caution, and he must choose carefully the ties that he will use to bind the plant to a stake lest he damage the plant in the process. So it is with the pope. He has not only the authority but the responsibility to steer and guide the Church, yet he may not do this according to his own designs but must always keep along the path that all the previous popes back to St Peter have already trodden. A pope may not innovate.

This is how we can know whether what a pope is doing is legitimate. Is he acting in accordance with what has gone before, and upholding Tradition? Or is he introducing new ideas, new practices, and new paths? Part of the definition of the word catholic is that all things – all aspects of the Catholic Church's theology, teaching, liturgy, and governance – hold together in a universal and comprehensive whole. There is a completeness about what the Church teaches and practices, with every aspect of Her being intimately connected to every other aspect of Her being. Anything that introduces a spirit of division or divisiveness is easily recognized as being something false.

This is why we must pray for our Holy Father the Pope. The task of any individual pope is burdensome in the extreme: he must hold together in unity the flock entrusted to his care, and he must ward off the wolves that would attack and divide the sheep, one from another. Pray for him daily; pray that he may be faithful to the charge entrusted to him by Our Lord Jesus Christ; pray for him that he may lead us all along the path of sanctification, and towards eternal salvation.

℣. Let us pray for Francis, our Pope.

℟. *May the Lord preserve him, give him long life, make him blessed upon the earth, and may the Lord not hand him over to the power of his enemies (Ps 40:3)*

℣. May your hand be upon your holy servant.

℟. *And upon your son whom you have anointed.*

Let us pray. O God, Pastor and Ruler of all the faithful, look down, in your mercy, upon your servant, Francis, whom you have appointed to preside over your Church; and grant, we beseech you, that both by word and example, he may edify all those under his charge, so that, with the flock entrusted to him, he may arrive at length unto life everlasting. Through Christ our Lord. R. Amen.