

Doubting Peter?

By Graham Osborne

What makes the Catholic Church different than every other Christian Church? That it claims to be the sole Church founded by Jesus on earth? No, other churches at least try to make that claim. What about the Eucharist? No, Eastern Orthodox churches possess a valid priesthood and Eucharist. What about Bishops that succeed from the Apostles? Eastern Orthodox again, and a few Protestant denominations try to make this claim as well – Episcopalians, Anglicans and a few others, though none have validly ordained Bishops.

All of these are reasonable guesses, but the answer is the Pope. The Catholic Church is the only Church whose leader traces his office, succession, and ordination right back to St Peter.

In a recent column, I detailed how Jesus left us a New Testament blueprint for the organization of the Church he founded. Let's revisit some of the key points surrounding Jesus' institution of Peter as the first leader or Pope of this Church [Pope is simply the name that has arisen for this office over the centuries, and comes from the Greek, pappas].

The key text in establishing Peter's office as head of Jesus' Church is Matthew 16:16-19: "thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven."

It seems pretty clear that this is a profoundly significant event: Jesus founding his Church on Peter, giving him incredible authority – the keys to the kingdom of Heaven, and promising to bind in Heaven whatever Peter binds on earth – and then promising the gates of hell would not prevail against this Church – it will never fall!

But because the office of pope is such a contentious point regarding legitimate authority in the Christian Church today, many have desperately tried to find some sort of grounds on which to reject the obvious sense of this text, and also reject Peter as its authoritative leader in the New Testament.

One such objection rests in the fact that the original inspired Greek of Matthew 16:18 reads, "*You are Peter [‘Petros’, Greek for “rock”, and as an English name, rendered Peter] and upon this rock [‘petra’] I will build my church*". The argument goes that, because petros and petra are different words, Jesus is not really building His church on Peter here, but something else. But Greek can have masculine and feminine forms of the same word, and this is precisely the case

here. Petros and petra are not essentially different words, but are synonyms for the *same* word. And Simon's new name is rendered as the masculine Petros rather than Petra simply because you would never give a man the female form of a word for his name. Interestingly, this is the first instance in recorded history where a human being has been given the name, Petros. Prior to this, it had only been used to refer to God.

Still others contend that Jesus isn't actually building His Church on Peter, the person, here, but on his "confession of faith" – "*you are the Messiah*" – found 2 verses earlier in Matthew 16:16. Now obviously, Peter's statement that Jesus is the Messiah is of critical importance. And it is actually further evidence of God's special guidance of Peter, over and above the other Apostles. But regardless, straightforward grammar tells us that such a theory simply can't be true. The statement, "*this rock*", must refer to the closest noun in the same sentence, and that is "*Peter*", *NOT* his grammatically disconnected "confession of faith" some two sentences earlier!

But additionally, the context of these verses is clearly all about Peter and what Jesus is giving him. In fact, Jesus refers to Peter no less than nine times in three verses here: "*Blessed are you, Simon... You are Peter... you... you... you...*"! It's all about Peter.

Evangelical scholar, Dr. Oscar Cullman, writing in one of the most respected Biblical Greek dictionaries, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, summarizes our above two points from an unbiased, scholarly Protestant perspective: "The obvious pun which has made its way into the Greek text . . . suggests a material identity between petra and Petros . . . it is impossible to differentiate between the two words . . . Petros himself *is this petra*, not just his faith or his confession . . . The idea of the Reformers that he [Jesus] is referring to the faith of Peter is quite inconceivable . . . For there is no reference here to the faith of Peter. Rather, the parallelism of "thou art Rock" and "on this rock I will build" shows that the second rock can only be the same as the first. It is thus evident that Jesus is referring to Peter, to whom he has given the name Rock . . . To this extent Roman Catholic exegesis is right and all Protestant attempts to evade this interpretation are to be rejected."

Luke 22:31-32 is yet another place where Jesus seems to give a primacy in leadership to Peter. Jesus tells Peter that "Satan has demanded to sift *all of you*" – all the Apostles. But then Jesus promises that he will pray specifically for Peter and confirm his faith: "but I have prayed *for you that your faith may not fail*", directing Peter to then, "strengthen your brethren."

And in John 21:15-17 Jesus, the Good Shepherd, now gives this key role of shepherd specifically to Peter, three times directing him to, "Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep."

And there is much more that could be said concerning Peter's obvious leadership role, including a litany of Petrine firsts that fill the New Testament. Here are just a few foundational ones: Peter's name is mentioned 191 time, with St John a distant second at 40. Peter would direct the Apostles to fill Judas' office in Acts 1 and then give the first sermon in Acts 2 – complete with 3000 conversions! In Acts 3:6-9, he performs the first healing, and in Acts 5:15-16, even his shadow heals the sick and drives out demons. In Acts 5, he gives the first ecclesial punishment (Ananias and Saphira), and in Acts 9, he performs the first raising from the dead! In Acts 10, he shatters Jewish preconceptions about the New Covenant and admits the first Gentiles into the Church, and in Acts 15, he silences the first Church council by issuing a strongly authoritative doctrinal decision: the Gentiles are saved by the grace of God, just as we are. It doesn't get more important than that! And finally, in Galatians 1:18-19, Paul comes to confer with Peter for 15 days, but none of the other Apostles.

No one else comes close to receiving the degree of authority and leadership that Jesus gives to Peter. But despite clear Biblical testimony to Peter's primacy, some still try to challenge this truth by appealing to several rather surprising arguments. Don't miss the Church's inspiring responses in my next column!