

## *We Catholics have a pope whose office changes over time.*

If there is one Scripture passage that seems to define Catholicism, it is what we hear today in Matthew chapter 16 – Peter’s profession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, and the words declaring Peter blessed because “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.”

And Peter receives a new mission symbolized by a change of name, Cephas becoming Peter, the rock, on which Jesus will build his church. Here, the power of binding and loosing appears to be given to Peter exclusively. Yet later, in Matthew chapter 18, that power is given to the whole church. We Catholics today hear this about Peter and immediately, with justifiable pride, identify our pope with Peter and ourselves with a church who has a pope. And we feel good about that.

But throughout history the promise of power to Peter has been interpreted in different ways, not just in the way we see the pope today. In St. Matthew’s Gospel, Peter is seen not as pope but as the model disciple, but one who is weak and ever needs the strength supplied by Christ. In the early church, Peter is remembered in two quite different ways – not as pope in either

case – but on the one hand as an Apostle and martyr and on the other hand as the model of faith for every true, spiritual Christian on whom the church is built. This last interpretation of Peter as the model rock of faith for all Christians became prominent in the Eastern Catholic tradition and in the Middle Ages.

It was not until the fourth century that there developed the Roman/pontifical interpretation: the rock is Peter, and the promises made to Peter apply also to Peter’s successors, the popes of the Catholic Church. And since the First Vatican Council in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this has been the normative interpretation for Roman Catholics. But fundamental to all interpretations of Peter’s authority are Jesus’ words in St. John’s gospel, chapter 21, that the church is *my* church and the sheep are *my* sheep and that ultimately the faith of every Christian rests on Christ, who is the good shepherd of the flock.

Since the First Vatican Council over a century ago, the papacy has achieved an authority and influence never before seen in church history. In an often chaotic century, the role of the pope has been to offer a prophetic voice against evil and injustice and to foster the unity and spread of the church. Just look at the extraordinary outpouring of support and enthusiasm greeting the pope in Canada and Poland these last weeks.

But there has been a downside to this relatively recent, heightened authority of the Catholic papacy. There has been a high degree of bureaucratic centralization at a time when increasing diversity is needed. There is also the issue of the extension of the power of binding and loosing to the whole church as reflected in Matthew chapter 18, and just how that is to shape the episcopacy and the wider community of disciples.

Our present pope, John Paul II, in his letter on ecumenism (*That all may be one*), notes the challenges arising from the Petrine office and asks Orthodox and Protestants to join with him to envision a kind of papacy that could serve Christian unity in the future. Ecumenical dialogs are underway with both the traditional churches of the East and those stemming from the Reformation, exploring ways a Petrine ministry might function in a renewed church.

My prayer to the Father through Jesus in this regard runs along these lines: "Lord, how did you view your religious leaders in your day?" "Lord, how did you pray for them?" "Lord, what enabled you to remain a faithful Jew and die in the faith in which you were born?" In the momentary silence prompted by such questions, I sense that God is in charge of all faith, of all religion.

Whatever the future, our faith rests on the rock that is Christ. Our faith rests on the rock of Peter and his successors, and on all faithful Christians through the centuries.

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