

Apostolic Succession

The Office, the Keys, and the Unbroken Line

by Richard Whiting

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. May be reproduced in whole, with attribution. See full notice at the end of this document.

Contents

- I. The Claim, and Where the Case Begins
- II. The Office Outlived the Man
- III. Paul Built It into the Structure
- IV. The Generation That Knew Them Says So
- V. The Keys, and the Royal Steward
- VI. A Church That Decides
- VII. What Infallibility Is Not
- VIII. And the Canon Comes Back
- IX. The Watchtower's Version, and What It Costs
- X. The Reply in Brief
- Endnotes

I. The Claim, and Where the Case Begins

The Catholic claim is that Christ founded a visible Church with officers, that those officers were empowered to appoint others, and that the office has never lapsed. From that follows everything else: a college of bishops who teach with His authority, and among them a successor of Peter who holds the keys. The case does not begin with a medieval council. It begins with what the apostles themselves did in the ten days after the Ascension.

II. The Office Outlived the Man

Judas died, and the eleven did not treat the number as reduced by one. Peter stands up, applies a psalm to the situation—"his office let another take" (Ps. 109:8)—and they elect Matthias in his place (Acts 1:15–26). The Greek word Peter quotes is *episkope*: the overseership, the bishopric. Before a word of the New Testament was written, the apostles

had established that what Christ gave them was an office, and that an office outlives the man holding it. That is the whole principle in one paragraph, and it is worth noticing where it comes from: not from Rome, not from the second century, and not from an argument about authority, but from the apostles solving a practical problem the only way that occurred to them.

Nor were they improvising in a vacuum. Christ had told them that the Spirit of truth would guide them “into all the truth” (John 16:13)—a promise that plainly left something still to be unfolded after he had gone. What they then did is the pattern. They filled a vacant office. When the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked, they created an order of ministers that had not existed the week before, and ordained seven men to it by prayer and the laying on of hands (Acts 6:1–6). Within a generation Paul is directing Titus to appoint elders town by town. The structure of the Church developed under apostolic hands, in the lifetime of the apostles, under the Spirit they had been promised. A Church forbidden to develop would be a Church the Spirit had finished with.

III. Paul Built It into the Structure

Paul does not treat the transmission as an emergency measure. He leaves Titus in Crete precisely to “appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). He reminds Timothy of the gift conferred by the laying on of hands (2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Tim. 4:14) and warns him not to be hasty in laying hands on anyone (1 Tim. 5:22)—a warning that presupposes the act confers something worth being careful about. And in one verse he lays out four generations: what Timothy heard from Paul, he is to entrust to faithful men, who will teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2). Paul, Timothy, the faithful men, the others. That is succession described, in the very letter Protestants quote for the sufficiency of Scripture.

As for whether “bishop” and “elder” were once interchangeable words: they plainly were, and the Church has never denied it. Titles settle less than the objection needs. What matters is whether apostolic authority was handed on, and Timothy and Titus are exercising it: ordaining, correcting doctrine, judging accusations against elders. Whatever they were called, they were doing a bishop’s work by appointment.

The objection deserves to be met in its strongest modern form, which is Catholic. Francis A. Sullivan, a Jesuit who taught ecclesiology at Rome’s Gregorian University for thirty-six years, concluded in *From Apostles to Bishops* (2001) that the churches of the New Testament era were led by colleges of presbyters; that the New Testament never uses “bishop” of a single ruling figure over a city, but loosely, sometimes of several men in one church (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1); and that the office of one bishop over each city was a development of the generations after the apostles, and it arrived in some churches—Rome apparently among the later—well into the second century. Sullivan himself held that the

development was guided by the Holy Spirit; but a Protestant reader will take the history and leave the theology, and it is the history that must be answered.¹

The deepest treatment of the terminology is Felix Cirlot's (*Apostolic Succession: Is It True?*, 1948), and his solution deserves to be better known. The words "bishop" and "presbyter," he argues, are role-labels that shifted their referents over time, not stable technical terms—and once the shift is tracked, a threefold structure of ministry is present all along under changing names. In the New Testament and the earliest sources, "bishop" names the second tier, the local minister later called "presbyter"; the highest tier, the men who governed and ordained, was in that era simply called "apostle." So Sullivan's correct observation that the New Testament never uses "bishop" for a single ruling figure reframes rather than refutes: if a monarchical office exists in the New Testament, it is not hiding under the label "bishop." It is operating under the label "apostle."²

The bridge between the Twelve and the Ignatian bishops is what Cirlot calls the *deutero-apostles*: men holding the highest tier of ministry, ordained by an apostle rather than commissioned by Christ personally—Timothy, Titus, James at Jerusalem. Paul himself distinguishes apostles made directly by God from those made through men (Gal. 1:1), and the Pastorals show these men ordaining and governing regions. On this reading there is no gap in governing authority between the apostles and the monarchical bishops, only a change of label around the time of Ignatius: apostles, then deutero-apostles, then bishops, one office throughout. Even the hardest text yields: 1 Clement 44, which names only bishops and deacons as continuing offices, uses "bishop" in the older second-tier sense—and Clement himself, a Roman writing to correct a Greek church and expecting obedience, is at that moment exercising exactly the third-tier authority the letter never needs to name.

Each piece of Sullivan's case meets its answer here. That the New Testament never calls a single ruler "bishop" is true, and it is exactly what the shifted terminology predicts: in the apostolic age the single ruling figure was called an apostle. That the local churches were governed by colleges of presbyters is also true, and beside the point, because above those colleges stood the apostles and deutero-apostles, ordaining and correcting—the very function whose transmission is in question. And the staggered arrival of the monarchical title tells against invention rather than for it. When Ignatius writes, about the year 107, he does not argue for the office as something new; he assumes it as the settled order of church after church—Antioch, Ephesus, Smyrna, Magnesia, Tralles—and exhorts obedience to it as a given. A genuine innovation of that scale, appearing everywhere at once without a word of protest, would be far harder to explain than a change of name. A change of name provokes no protest, because there is nothing to fight about.

IV. The Generation That Knew Them Says So

The witnesses here are unusually early. Clement, writing from Rome to Corinth about the year 96—while the apostle John was probably still alive—states what the apostles arranged: they appointed their first converts to office, and “added the codicil that if they should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministry.” That is not an inference; it is a statement by a man in a position to know. Notice also what Clement is doing. He is a Roman bishop writing to a church in Greece, intervening in its internal quarrel, telling it to reinstate deposed presbyters, and expecting to be obeyed. Corinth had an apostle’s letters of its own, and John was far closer geographically. Rome wrote anyway.³

Irenaeus, about 180, makes the argument explicit against the Gnostics: the apostolic churches can name their bishops in order from the apostles. He names the Roman line himself: the apostles “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”—and so on to his own day, adding of Rome that “it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority.” The Gnostics could produce no such list, which was his point. Tertullian, a generation later, issues the same challenge as a legal demand: let the heretics unroll the register of their bishops and show a founder among the apostles. A century after the apostles, succession was still the public test of a true church, and the test only works if everyone concerned already accepted it.⁴

The list deserves printing in full, because its very ordinariness is the argument: Peter and Paul as founders; then Linus, Anacletus, Clement, Evaristus, Alexander, Sixtus, Telesphorus (“who was gloriously martyred”), Hyginus, Pius, Anicetus, Soter, and Eleutherius, “in the twelfth place from the apostles,” holding the office as Irenaeus wrote. And his conclusion states what the register is for: “In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth.” He was not reasoning from hearsay; he had heard Polycarp, who had been appointed by apostles and had talked with many who had seen Christ.

V. The Keys, and the Royal Steward

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). The image is not invented for the occasion. It comes from Isaiah, where God removes the steward Shebna from office and gives his position to Eliakim: “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and

none shall shut” (Isa. 22:20–22). Two things follow. The steward of a royal house is not the king; he governs in the king’s absence and by the king’s authority—which is exactly what Catholics claim, and exactly what the objection usually assumes they do not. And the office in Isaiah has a *succession*: the whole passage is about one man replacing another in it. Christ hands Peter an office His hearers already knew to be transferable.

On the wordplay: Christ was speaking Aramaic, where there is one word, *Kepha*, and John preserves it (John 1:42). Greek forced the shift, because *petra* is feminine and would make an odd man’s name. And if the rock were merely Peter’s confession, the renaming makes no sense: nobody is given a new name to commemorate somebody else’s foundation. That Paul rebuked him at Antioch is beside the point; the rebuke was about conduct, not teaching, and popes have been rebuked by saints ever since without anyone concluding the office was vacant.

VI. A Church That Decides

The clearest evidence that the apostles thought they could settle a question is that they did. A doctrinal dispute arises over circumcising Gentile converts, a question on which Scripture, as it then stood, was not obviously on their side. They do not settle it by a text alone. They convene, argue, and issue a decree, and the decree says: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Then they send it to churches that had sent no delegates, as binding. Whatever that is, it is a living teaching authority claiming the Holy Spirit’s backing for a decision—which is precisely what a Magisterium is. And Luke reports it without a hint that it was extraordinary. James does cite the prophets—but after the decision has taken shape, to show that “with this the words of the prophets agree” (Acts 15:15): the text confirms the judgment; it does not replace it.

The sharpest particular from this chapter—that it is James, not Peter, who pronounces the judgment—deserves a straight answer, and the answer begins with a concession: James does speak last, does say “my judgment is” (Acts 15:19), and Catholic tradition itself names him the first bishop of Jerusalem, presiding in his own city. But the objection confuses chairing a meeting with settling its question. The doctrinal question—must Gentiles take the Mosaic yoke to be saved?—was settled by Peter: he rises after “much debate,” recalls that God chose “that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel,” and declares that all are saved through grace—and “all the assembly kept silence” (Acts 15:7–12). The debate ends when Peter speaks. What James then proposes is the pastoral application. Nor has Rome ever claimed the pope must chair every council; most ecumenical councils were not presided over by the pope in person. The distinction Acts 15 actually draws—a local bishop presiding, Peter’s voice deciding the doctrine—is not an embarrassment to the Catholic conception of primacy. It is a description of it.

VII. What Infallibility Is Not

Most of the historical objections dissolve once the doctrine is stated as the Church states it rather than as the polemic states it. Infallibility is not impeccability: it says nothing about a pope's holiness, and the tenth century is exactly the embarrassment it appears to be. It does not mean inspiration: no pope receives new revelation, and the definition explicitly denies it. It is a negative protection, in narrow conditions, that a pope defining a doctrine of faith or morals for the whole Church will not define error. In that solemn form it has been used twice: the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950).⁵

Honorius. He was condemned by an ecumenical council, by name, and Catholics should say so plainly rather than reach for the softest available reading. The council's own language is severe, and Leo II, confirming its acts, wrote that Honorius had permitted the faith to be stained. It is true that Leo elsewhere speaks of negligence rather than false teaching, and the reading is contested. So rest the answer where it does not depend on that quarrel: whatever Honorius was condemned for, he had defined nothing. The two letters at issue were private correspondence to a bishop, answering a question about how to speak, and were never proposed as binding on the Church. A pope who teaches badly in a letter, or fails to act when he should have, is exactly the case the doctrine leaves untouched—which is why the strongest counter-example anyone has produced in nineteen centuries is a man who never defined anything at all.

The Great Western Schism: forty years of genuine confusion, and nobody pretends otherwise. But notice what was disputed: not whether there is a successor of Peter, but which of three men was he. That is a crisis about a fact, and no doctrine promises that the fact will always be easy to establish. And 1870: doctrines are defined when they are denied; that is the pattern of every council. Nicaea defined the divinity of Christ in 325, and nobody concludes He was not divine in 324. The definition of 1870 followed Gallicanism and the pressure of the modern state, and it settled a question those movements had raised.

VIII. And the Canon Comes Back

There is one difficulty the objection cannot walk around. Nothing in Scripture lists the books of Scripture. The table of contents in every Protestant Bible was received from the fourth-century Church, from councils of bishops, exercising exactly the authority being denied. To keep the canon while rejecting the authority that identified it is to trust the Church's judgment on the most important question it ever decided and no other. The argument is developed in the companion essay on *sola scriptura*; here it need only be

stated, because it is the succession question in another dress: the same hands that laid on hands drew up the list.

Priests, and a Priesthood

Behind the historical arguments lies the theological one that matters more, so meet it squarely: every believer is a priest. The Catholic Church teaches exactly that—the baptized share a royal priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices of prayer, work, and life. But notice where Peter got the phrase. He is quoting Exodus 19:6, “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”—spoken to Israel at Sinai. And Israel, from the day those words were uttered, also had an ordained priesthood: the royal priesthood of the whole people and the appointed ministry of Aaron’s line stood together, in the very covenant that coined the phrase, for over a thousand years. The words cannot exclude what they always coexisted with. So in the New Testament: the same apostles who called the whole Church priestly also appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23), left Titus in Crete to do the same (Titus 1:5), and handed on office by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). The priesthood of all believers is not the alternative to apostolic succession; in Scripture the two have never existed apart.

IX. The Watchtower’s Version, and What It Costs

The Watchtower objection is not a stronger form of the Protestant one. It is a different claim, and it has to carry a much heavier load. To say that no succession is worth anything because the congregation apostatized is to say that Christ’s Church failed—that the gates of hell did prevail, for something like eighteen centuries, over the thing He promised they would not. That is a large thing to assert, and it is asserted without a date, a place, or the name of a man who resisted the change; the claim is answered at length in the companion essay on the Great Apostasy.

What deserves noticing here is narrower. Having rejected a teaching authority handed on from the apostles, the Watchtower did not do without one. It identified the “faithful and discreet slave” of Matthew 24:45 with its own leadership, dated the appointment to 1919, and now requires of eight million people a submission more complete than Rome has ever asked of anyone. The line from the apostles was rejected; the office was not. It was refounded in Brooklyn, on an interpretation of a parable, without a single link to the men who knew Christ—and the organization that did this teaches that accepting an unbroken succession from Peter is presumption. The reader may weigh which claim carries the greater burden: an office attested from Acts 1 through Clement, Irenaeus, and Tertullian to the present, or one dated to 1919 by the men who hold it.⁶

X. The Reply in Brief

The apostles treated what Christ gave them as an office, and filled its first vacancy before Pentecost. Paul structured its transmission and described four generations of it. The men who knew the apostles—Clement within the first century, Irenaeus and Tertullian after him—state the arrangement, name the names, and use the list as the public test of a true church. The keys Christ gave Peter came from a passage about an office that outlives its holder. A Church that could decide at Jerusalem, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” is a Church with a living voice—and the alternative, on inspection, is not a Christianity without teaching authority but a Christianity whose teaching authorities are recent, self-appointed, and unable to produce the register. The succession is not a medieval accretion on the gospel. It is the gospel’s own arrangement for outliving the men who first preached it.

Endnotes

1. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman Press, 2001), summarized rather than quoted; Sullivan taught ecclesiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University for thirty-six years.
2. Felix L. Cirlot, *Apostolic Succession: Is It True?* (1948); the terminological thesis, the deutero-apostle category, and the 1 Clement 44 answer are summarized from the synopsis held in the site’s reference library.
3. Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 42, 44 (c. A.D. 96); the codicil sentence is quoted exactly from the Kirsopp Lake translation in the site’s reference library.
4. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.2–3, quoted exactly from the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation in the site’s reference library; Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 32, summarized from the same shelf. The full list and the “In this order” conclusion are 3.3.3, from the same copy; Polycarp, 3.3.4. A study of the passage is also held in the library.
5. First Vatican Council, *Pastor Aeternus* (1870), ch. 4, summarized; the two ex cathedra definitions are Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), and Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950).
6. On the 1919 appointment claim and its costs, see Don Cameron, *Captives of a Concept*, and Ronald Frye’s treatise on the faithful-and-discreet-slave doctrine, both held in the site’s reference library; the argument is developed on the site’s By What Authority? page.

For Further Reading

Upon This Rock—St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church, by Stephen K. Ray.

Jesus, Peter and the Keys—A Scriptural Handbook on the Papacy, by Scott Butler, Norman Dahlgren, and David Hess.

The Early Papacy—To the Synod of Chalcedon in 451, by Adrian Fortescue.

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, by John Henry Newman. Free online at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/>.

The Shape of Catholic Theology—An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles, and History, by Aidan Nichols.

Saints and Sinners—A History of the Popes, by Eamon Duffy.

The Faith of the Early Fathers—Volumes 1, 2, and 3, by William A. Jurgens.

Apostolic Succession: Is It True?, by Felix L. Cirlot (1948)—the terminological study; long out of print.

* * *

“And what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” — 2 Timothy 2:2

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Copyright and Distribution

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved.

This essay may be reproduced and distributed freely, in printed or electronic form, provided that it is reproduced in whole and without alteration, and that the author’s name is retained. Excerpts may be quoted in reviews, scholarly works, or other writings consistent with fair use, with attribution.

A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession and the Petrine office*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is

fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.