

Is the Pope the Successor of Peter?

The Petrine Office, Vatican I, and the Objections Answered

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I. One Man in White

Of everything that divides Catholics from other Christians, nothing divides more visibly than one man in white. Churches that agree with each other about almost nothing else agree that Rome claims too much for the successor of Peter. The Westminster Confession of 1647 put the objection at full strength: "There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ." The American church deleted that clause in 1789, and few Protestants would write it today; but the conviction beneath it remains wherever the Reformation's children gather: the papacy is a human growth on a divine institution.¹

This essay takes the question at its narrowest and strongest. Not whether popes have been good men—some have been scoundrels, and the Catholic case is stronger for saying so at the outset—but whether Christ gave Peter a unique place among the Twelve, whether that place was an office designed to continue, and whether what the First Vatican Council defined in 1870 is what its objectors think it is. Three concessions are made here at the start, because the argument does not need to hide them: Peter denied his Lord three times and wavered at Antioch; some popes have disgraced the office; and the solemn definition of infallibility does indeed date from 1870. The question is what follows.

II. The Portrait Scripture Paints

Set aside Matthew 16 entirely for a moment and simply watch Peter. He is named in the New Testament roughly one hundred ninety times; John, the nearest rival among the Twelve, appears about thirty. Every list of the apostles puts him first—and Matthew makes the ranking explicit: “first, Simon, who is called Peter” (Matt. 10:2). The word is *protos*, “first,” and it cannot mean first called, for Andrew his brother was called before him. He speaks for the Twelve at every hinge of the Gospel story: at Caesarea Philippi, at Capernaum—“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”—at the Transfiguration, in Gethsemane’s aftermath, at the empty tomb, at Pentecost.²

Two scenes deserve to be read slowly. On the night of the betrayal, Jesus tells the apostles: “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). The Greek is precise where English blurs: Satan demanded to have *you*—plural, all the apostles—but I have prayed for *you*—singular, Peter alone—and the charge that follows is Peter’s toward the rest: strengthen your brethren. In the hour the whole college is threatened, Christ’s provision for the college is one man’s confirmed faith.³

And after the resurrection, by the Sea of Tiberias, the risen Christ asks Peter three times—once for each denial—“do you love me?”, and three times commissions him: “feed my lambs… tend my sheep… feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). The flock is not transferred; the sheep remain *my* sheep. What is conferred is the shepherding of them, under the Shepherd, by the man whose failure had just been publicly healed. This is not a proof-text; it is a pattern drawn across four Gospels, and patterns are harder to explain away than verses.

III. Acts: The Pattern Walks

In the Acts of the Apostles the pattern gets up and walks. Peter presides over the replacement of Judas, quoting the psalm that another should receive his *office* (Acts

1:20)—the apostles themselves treating apostleship as an office that outlives its holder, which is worth remembering when succession is dismissed as a later idea. Peter preaches the Church’s first sermon and three thousand are baptized (Acts 2). He works the Church’s first public healing (Acts 3), answers for the Twelve before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4), pronounces the first discipline (Acts 5), and—by a revelation given to him and to no one else—opens the door of the Church to the Gentiles (Acts 10).⁴

Then comes the council of Jerusalem, the favorite text of the objection. Read it whole. “After there had been much debate, Peter rose” and testified that God had chosen the Gentiles through his mouth—“and all the assembly kept silence” (Acts 15:7, 12). The debate ends when Peter speaks. James, presiding over his own local church, then frames the practical decree, beginning from Peter’s testimony: “Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles.” Speaking last and drafting the letter is what a moderator does; ending the argument is what Peter did. The scene shows exactly the relation Catholics claim: a Petrine word that settles the doctrinal question, exercised within a college of apostles and elders, not instead of one.⁵

IV. The Rock, the Keys, and the Office

Now put Matthew 16 back on the table, surrounded by all of the above. “You are Peter, and on this rock 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” (Matt. 16:18–19). The famous wordplay objection—*Petros* the stone against *petra* the bedrock—dissolves in the language Jesus actually spoke. In Aramaic there is one word, *Kepha*, and John preserves it: “You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter)” (John 1:42). Greek forced the variation because *petra* is feminine and would make an odd man’s name. And the renaming itself is the tell: in Scripture God renames men—Abram, Jacob—when He gives them a role in His plan, and nobody is given a new name to commemorate somebody else’s foundation.⁶

Does a rock-Peter compete with Christ the one foundation (1 Cor. 3:11)? Only if metaphors may not do different work in different sentences—Scripture calls Christ the Good Shepherd and tells Peter to shepherd; calls Christ the light of the world and calls the disciples the same; lays the Church’s foundation on Christ alone, on the apostles and prophets together (Eph. 2:20), and on Peter by name. Augustine, reviewing his works at the end of his life, recorded that he had read the rock both ways—Peter, and the Christ Peter confessed—and left the reader to choose. The two readings were never rivals: Peter is rock precisely *as* confessing. And Augustine, who let both stand, lived and died in communion with the Roman see.⁷

The keys are the detail that turns a compliment into an office. They come from Isaiah 22, where the key of the house of David marks the office of the royal steward—the king’s deputy, who governs the household in the king’s name and whose office the Isaiah passage itself shows passing from one holder (Shebna) to the next (Eliakim): “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut” (Isa. 22:22). A steward is not the king’s rival; he is the king’s provision for the household in the king’s absence—which is exactly what Catholics claim for Peter’s successor and exactly what the objection assumes they do not. That argument, with the succession built into the steward’s office, is developed in full in this site’s essay on apostolic succession; the present essay leans on it rather than repeating it.⁸

V. Antioch, and the Objections from Peter’s Conduct

At Antioch, Paul “opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (Gal. 2:11). The episode is real and the Catholic reading does not sand it down: Peter, fearing the circumcision party, withdrew from eating with Gentile Christians, and his example dragged others, even Barnabas, with him. But notice what the rebuke was about—conduct, table fellowship, a failure of nerve—and not teaching; the doctrine that Gentiles stand free had been Peter’s own, revealed to him at Joppa and declared by him at Jerusalem. Infallibility, as the next section will show, has never meant that popes behave well; Peter’s lapse at Antioch is the first entry in a long file of papal behavior that the doctrine never covered. And the sting of the episode depends entirely on Peter’s example carrying unique weight: nobody drafts half of Galatians about the inconsistency of a nobody.⁹

The same goes for the observation that Peter calls himself “a fellow elder” (1 Pet. 5:1). Of course he does; the greatest office in the Church is exercised as service, by its Founder’s explicit command—“let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves” (Luke 22:26), words spoken minutes before the prayer for Peter’s faith. Humble self-description is not abdication. The pope who signs himself *servus servorum Dei*, servant of the servants of God, is following Peter’s style precisely.

VI. What Vatican I Actually Defined

Almost no one who objects to papal infallibility has read the definition, so here it is. The First Vatican Council taught “that when the Roman Pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church, he possesses… that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals,” and

that such definitions are irreformable “of themselves, and not by the consent of the church.”¹⁰

Count the conditions. The pope must be exercising his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians—not musing at dinner, writing a private letter, or giving an interview. He must be *defining*—not opining, preferring, or predicting. The matter must be faith or morals—not science, politics, or administration. And the definition must be addressed to the whole Church. What the definition does not claim is just as important, and the council said so: infallibility is not impeccability—it promises nothing about a pope’s holiness; it is not inspiration—no pope receives new revelation; it is a negative protection, in narrow conditions, that the Church’s supreme teacher, when solemnly binding the whole Church on faith or morals, will not bind her to error. In that solemn form it has been exercised twice in two centuries: the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Assumption in 1950.¹¹

VII. Honorius, and the Bad Popes

The historical objections should be measured against that definition, not against the polemical version of it. The bad popes—the tenth century’s disgraces, the Borgia household, the indulgence traffic that lit the Reformation—are exactly the embarrassment they appear to be, and this site examines the record without flinching in its essay on Church history. But unprotected *behavior* does not touch a claim about protected *teaching*; the doctrine predicted nothing about the men except that God would not let them bind the Church to error, and in nineteen centuries none of them—not the worst—ever did. The strongest counter-example anyone has produced is Honorius, condemned by name at an ecumenical council for his part in the monothelite affair; and whatever Honorius was condemned for, he had defined nothing—the two letters at issue were private correspondence, never proposed as binding the Church. His case is treated with its sources in this site’s essay on Orthodoxy and the Great Schism.¹²

VIII. 1870, and What Was New in It

Was the dogma, then, invented in 1870? What 1870 did was define, under challenge, what the Church had long practiced—and definition following long practice is the normal grammar of doctrine. The deity of Christ was defined at Nicaea in 325, three centuries after the Resurrection; the canon of Scripture settled later still. A Protestant who receives Nicaea’s late definition cannot disqualify a doctrine merely for the date of its defining, or the same blade cuts down the Trinity and the Bible with it.¹³

And the practice is old. Within the first century—while the apostle John was likely still alive—the church of Rome intervened authoritatively in the affairs of Corinth, a Greek church with closer apostolic neighbors, and the Corinthians kept the letter and read it in

church for generations. The early record of Rome acting, and of the East appealing to Rome, is set out source by source in the Great Schism essay on this site. As for the minority bishops of 1870, honesty requires both halves: a substantial minority did oppose the definition, and most of that minority opposed its *opportune*ness—whether defining then was wise—rather than the doctrine itself. After the council, the bishops accepted it; the conspicuous holdout was the historian Döllinger, not the episcopate.¹⁴

IX. The Antichrist Clause

A last word about Westminster's hardest sentence, answered without heat. The exegesis behind it reads the "man of sin" of 2 Thessalonians 2—who "takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God"—as the papal office. But the identification proves enormously more than its users want. It requires the see that preserved the Scriptures through the centuries every Protestant Bible depends on, defined the Trinity and the two natures every Protestant confession affirms, and sent the missionaries who converted the nations of Europe, to have been, all the while, the seat of Satan. The Westminster tradition itself thought better of the sentence in 1789. When the polemic is set aside, what remains is the sober question this essay has pursued: whether Christ left His flock a visible shepherd under Himself. That question is not settled by a label; it is settled by the texts.¹⁵

X. Feed My Sheep

Gather the case. A fisherman renamed Rock by the only Person in the Gospels who gives new names. The keys of a steward's office that Isaiah shows outliving its holder. A singular prayer in a plural crisis, with a charge to strengthen the brethren. A threefold commission over the flock of Another. First place in every list, first voice at every hinge, and a council's debate that ends when he stands. Then a definition, eighteen centuries on, so much narrower than its reputation that its objectors refute a doctrine the Church does not hold—while the doctrine she does hold has never once, in the hands of her worst men, failed in the one thing it promises.

The Protestant reader is owed a closing word without a trap in it. Nothing here argued that popes are wise or holy, and nothing asked you to submit to a man. The question is whether the Good Shepherd, who knew what wolves and centuries would do, left His flock a shepherd under Himself—or only a book, to be interpreted by each reader against all the others. This site's pages on Scripture alone and on the canon press that second option to its conclusion. This essay only adds the scene by the lakeside, and asks who it was spoken to, and why: "Feed my sheep."

Endnotes

1. Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), XXV.6; the American revision of 1789 removed the antichrist clause. The claim that Christ alone is Head of the Church stands in both forms.
2. Matthew 10:2; John 6:68; the name counts are approximate and vary slightly by method, but Peter's dominance does not. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
3. Luke 22:31–32. The Greek pronouns are unambiguous: *hymas* (plural) for the demand, *sou* (singular) for the prayer.
4. Acts 1:15–26 (with Psalm 109:8, “his office let another take,” at Acts 1:20); Acts 2:14–41; 3:1–10; 4:8–12; 5:1–11; 10:9–48.
5. Acts 15:7–21.
6. Matthew 16:18–19; John 1:42. On the renamings: Genesis 17:5; 32:28.
7. 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20; Augustine, *Retractations* 1.20 (1.21 in some editions), where he sets out both readings and leaves the choice to the reader.
8. Isaiah 22:20–22; Matthew 16:19. See the essay accompanying “Apostolic Succession” on this site for the steward's office and its succession.
9. Galatians 2:11–14; Acts 10; Acts 15:7–11; 1 Peter 5:1–3; Luke 22:26.
10. Vatican I, dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus* (18 July 1870), ch. 4, in the translation at papalencyclicals.net.
11. *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854); *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950). On what infallibility is not, see also the treatment in the apostolic succession essay on this site.
12. Constantinople III (680–81) on Honorius; the letters at issue were his correspondence with Sergius of Constantinople. See the essay accompanying “Orthodoxy and the Great Schism” on this site, with its sources.
13. Nicaea I (325); on the canon, see the essay “Why Do Catholic Bibles Have More Books?” on this site.
14. 1 Clement (c. 96), the letter of the Roman church to the Corinthians; Dionysius of Corinth, in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.23, attests it was still read at Corinth decades later. On the minority of 1870 and its subsequent adherence, see the standard histories of the council.
15. 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4; Westminster Confession XXV.6 and the revision of 1789.

For Further Reading

The Early Papacy, by Adrian Fortescue—the Roman primacy to the Council of Chalcedon (451), from the sources.

Pastor Aeternus, Vatican I (1870)—the actual definition, conditions and all. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>.

Apostolic Succession—the keys, the royal steward of Isaiah 22, and the office that outlives the man. Free online at https://richwhiting.com/weft/apostolic_succession/apostolic_succession.php.

Orthodoxy and the Great Schism—Rome and the East: the early interventions, the appeals, and the Honorius case. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/weft/orthodoxy/orthodoxy.php>.

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“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

*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.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the Petrine office and papal infallibility*, 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.