

Chapter 1

The Position of the Roman Catholic Church

Peter's Confession

Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is found in all three Synoptic¹ Gospels.² In fact, the literary structure of the Synoptics is based on this confession of faith. It represents both a climax and a point of transition between Jesus' early ministry in Galilee and his later ministry in Judea and Perea, culminating in his final journey to Jerusalem.³

However, Christ's response to Peter's confession is found only in Matthew. As recorded, it includes three specific statements relevant to the present study:

- I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church
- I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven
- Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven

The complete account given by Matthew is as follows:

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea

1 "The use of the term 'synoptic' dates from Griesbach (1745-1812). This Greek word means 'a seeing together,' and it is aptly applied to the first three gospels [Matthew, Mark and Luke] in view of the fact that their records have so much in common" (Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971], p. 143).

2 Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-29; Luke 9:18-20.

3 D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 19.

Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." 20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.⁴

It is the purpose of the first eleven chapters of this book to present a detailed exegesis of Jesus' response to Peter's confession as recorded in Matthew's gospel. Chapters 12 and 13 present a similar study of John 20:21-23, as chapter 14 does for John 21:15-19.

Interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church

The three statements recorded by Matthew in the response of Christ to Peter's confession form perhaps the most important foundation for Roman Catholic theology, the *locus classicus* for Papal supremacy. Vatican II reaffirmed its doctrine of the church in its first document, "Dogmatic Constitution of the Church." In Chapter I, "The Mystery of the Church," the following is stated:

Christ is the light of all nations. Hence this most sacred Synod, which has been gathered in the Holy Spirit, eagerly desires to shed on all men that radiance of His which brightens the countenance of the Church. This it will do by proclaiming the gospel to every creature (cf. Mk. 16:15).

By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a

4 Matt. 16:13-20. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*.

kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind, that is, she is a sign and an instrument of such union and unity. For this reason, following in the path laid out by its predecessors, this Council wishes to set forth more precisely to the faithful and to the entire world the nature and encompassing mission of the Church....

This is the unique Church of Christ which in the [Apostles'] Creed we avow as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. After His Resurrection our Savior handed her over to Peter to be shepherded (Jn. 21:17), commissioning him and the other apostles to propagate and govern her (cf. Mt. 28:18 ff.). Her He erected for all ages as "the pillar and mainstay of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the [Roman] Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure....⁵

Then in Chapter III, "The Hierarchical Structure of the Church, With Special Reference to the Episcopate," more detail is given in regard to Peter:

This most sacred Synod, following in the footsteps of the First Vatican Council, teaches and declares with that Council that Jesus Christ, the eternal Shepherd, established His holy Church by sending forth the apostles as He Himself had been sent by the Father (cf. Jn. 20:21). He willed that their successors, namely the bishops, should be shepherds in His Church even to the consummation of the world.

In order that the episcopate itself might be one and undivided, He placed blessed Peter over the other apostles, and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and fellowship. And all this teaching about the institution, the perpetuity, the force and reason for the sacred primacy of the Roman Pontiff and of

5 *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), Nihil Obstat: Felix F. Cardegna, Imprimatur: Lawrence Cardinal Shehan, pp. 14-15, 22-23.

his infallible teaching authority, this sacred Synod again proposes to be firmly believed by all the faithful.

Continuing in the same task of clarification begun by Vatican I, this Council has decided to declare and proclaim before all men its teaching concerning bishops, the successors of the apostles, who together with the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ and the visible Head of the whole Church, govern the house of the living God.⁶

On what basis is it believed that Peter was placed "over the other apostles" and made the "Vicar of Christ and the visible Head of the whole Church"? The answer is that this foundational doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church is based primarily on the three statements made by Christ in his response to Peter's confession in Matthew's account, as cited above.

By everywhere preaching the gospel (cf. Mk. 16:20), which was accepted by their hearers under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the apostles gathered together the universal Church, which the Lord established on the apostles and *built upon blessed Peter*, their chief, Christ Jesus Himself remaining the supreme cornerstone (cf. Apoc. 21:14; Mt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20).⁷

"Built upon blessed Peter" is based on the statement, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). The Council refers again to Peter's confession in the following statement:

Just as, by the Lord's will, St. Peter and the other apostles constituted one apostolic college, so in a similar way the Roman Pontiff as the successor of Peter, and the bishops as the successors of the apostles are joined together....

The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in teaching authority and pastoral rule; or, rather, in the episcopal order the apostolic body continues without a break. Together

6 Ibid., pp. 37-38.

7 Ibid., p. 39; emphasis added.

with its head, the Roman Pontiff, and never without this head, the episcopal order is the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church. But this power can be exercised only with the consent of the Roman Pontiff. *For our Lord made Simon Peter alone the rock and keybearer of the Church (cf. Mt. 16:18-19), and appointed him shepherd of the whole flock (cf. Jn. 21:15 ff.).*

It is definite, however, that *the power of binding and loosing, which was given to Peter (Mt. 16:19), was granted also to the college of apostles, joined with their head (Mt. 18:18; 28:16-20).*⁸

Again note that the Scriptural evidence cited for taking Peter as the head of the Church is the response of Christ to Peter's confession in Matthew 16. John 21:15-19 is also cited in this regard.

Similar statements regarding the doctrine of the Church are made by the Council in its sixth document, "Decree on Ecumenism," Chapter I:

In order to establish this holy Church of His everywhere in the world until the end of time, Christ entrusted to the College of the Twelve the task of teaching, ruling, and sanctifying (cf. Mt. 28:18-20, in conjunction with Jn. 20:21-23). Among their number He chose Peter. After Peter's profession of faith, He decreed that *on him He would build His Church; to Peter He promised the keys of the kingdom of heaven* (cf. Mt. 16:19, in conjunction with Mt. 18:18). After Peter's profession of love, *Christ entrusted all His sheep to him* to be confirmed in faith (cf. Lk. 22:32) and shepherded in perfect unity (cf. Jn. 21:15-17). Meanwhile, Christ Jesus Himself forever remains the chief cornerstone (cf. Eph. 2:20) and shepherd of our souls (cf. 1 Pet. 2:25).⁹

Some thirty years following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, an official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was issued based on the dogmas and decrees set forth by that Council. It contains definitions and amplifications of the

8 Ibid., pp. 42-43; emphasis added.

9 Ibid., p. 344; emphasis added.

doctrine of the Church and the headship of Peter.

From the beginning of his public life Jesus chose certain men, twelve in number, to be with him and to participate in his mission. He gives the Twelve a share in his authority and "sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal" [Luke 9:2]. They remain associated for ever with Christ's kingdom, for through them he directs the Church...

Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve; Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. Through a revelation from the Father, Peter had confessed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Our Lord then declared to him: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" [Matt. 16:18]. Christ, the "living stone" [1 Pet. 2:4], thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the powers of death....

Jesus entrusted a specific authority to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" [Matt. 16:19]. The "power of the keys" designates authority to govern the house of God, which is the Church. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, confirmed this mandate after his Resurrection: "Feed my sheep" [John 21:15-17]. The power to "bind and loose" connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church. Jesus entrusted this authority to the Church through the ministry of the apostles [Matt. 18:18] and in particular through the ministry of Peter, the only one to whom he specifically entrusted the keys of the kingdom.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994), Imprimi Potest: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, paragraphs 551-553, pp. 141-142. The catechism later seems to give a more restricted definition to the power of binding and loosing: "The words *bind* and *loose* mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. *Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God*" (paragraph 1445, p. 363; emphasis original).

These foundational doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, as summarized above in *The Documents of Vatican II* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, are based primarily on three Scriptures:

- Matthew 16:13-20; 18:18
- John 20:21-23
- John 21:15-19

This book presents a thorough exegesis of these three texts to determine whether they support the doctrine of the church proposed by Roman Catholicism.