

Roman Catholicism Apostolic Succession

The Roman Catholic Church claims that it is the only true church, having been founded by Peter, and entrusted exclusively with the stewardship of truth. It exercises this office by the magisterium, an “infallible teaching office”, through which it acts as the only authentic interpreter of the scriptures. This claim results from

- various scriptural references which are alleged to show the supremacy of Peter over the other disciples and apostles
- Peter is the founder of the Church of Rome, which he then endowed with his apostolic authority
- This apostolic authority has been passed on to each succeeding Bishop of Rome (later Pope) in an unbroken chain of authority.

Each of these claims will be dealt with in turn. Some will be addressed by an examination of history, others by scripture. Our first step is the scriptural claims of the RCC. Read Matthew 16:13-19

The Supremacy of Peter

Section 1: “The Roman Catholic Church was founded by Peter, who was granted unique authority by Jesus.”

1. What do verses 17-19 appear to indicate about the primacy of Peter and his future status in the church?

2. Given the appearance of Petrine supremacy in verses 17-19, let us examine the context. To whom was Jesus speaking? (See verse 13)

3. Peter answers (verse 16) Jesus’ question (verse 15). What does this indicate regarding Peter’s standing among the disciples? (See also Matt 16:14, Mark 9:38, John 14:5,8,22)

4. The Greek word for “Peter” in verse 18 is “petros”, or a pebble. The Greek word for “rock” is “petra”, or a large stone. Strong’s lexicon identifies this word as referring metaphorically to a “man like a rock, by reason of his firmness and strength of soul”. What inference can be made from Matthew’s use of these two different words?

5. Does Peter match the description of petra? (verses 21-23)

6. What is the “rock”? (1 Peter 2:6-8, c.f. Is 28:16, Ps 118:22, Is 8:14)

7. In verse 19, Jesus who is the “you” that is granted the “keys of the kingdom of heaven”? (See Luke 22:24-30, Matt 19:28)

8. Is there any direct indication that Peter is to be greater than the other apostles? (See 2 Cor 12:11)

9. What are the keys? (See Is 22:22) Do they indicate an independent authority? (see Matt 18:18)

10. Verse 19 refers to binding and loosing. This appears to give Peter and the other disciples power to control heaven. The Greek "shall be bound/loosed" is a perfect passive participle which properly translates "shall have been bound/loosed". What does this say about the power granted?

11. Is this grant given exclusively to Peter? (See Matt 18:18)

Read John 21:15-17 Note that this is after the resurrection. The RCC insists that this passage shows Jesus again conferring upon Peter a special status, this time as the ultimate and supreme shepherd of the flock. They lean on the Greek verb *bosko* (to pasture; by extension to fodder; reflexively, to graze) to interpretively translate the phrase as "shepherd my sheep". They then say that Jesus has called Peter uniquely to be the shepherd of the flock after He leaves.

12. Does this passage grant Peter any unique status?

13. Does Peter pass on this privilege to a successor in Rome? (1 Peter 1:1, 5:1-2)

14. What does Jesus say about this claim? (John 10:16)

Challenge: Why did Jesus speak to Peter in the manner seen in John 21:15-17?

Read Luke 22:31-32 The RCC insists that Jesus' call for Peter to strengthen his brothers indicates the pre-eminent status of Peter among the twelve.

15. The verb "strengthen" is used in other settings by Luke. (See Acts 14:22, 15:32, 15:41, 18:23 It is also used by Paul (Rom1:11, 16:25) Does it properly indicate any unique status for Peter?

16. The context is found in verses 24-30. What is Peter's true status among the twelve?

17. What special status has been reserved for the twelve? (Verses29-30)

Read Acts 2:14 ff. The RCC claims that Peter's action as the recorded preacher shows a pre-eminent status for him.

18. Does this passage indicate any special status for Peter?

19. Who was granted the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues? (Verses 2-11)

20. Was anyone granted a special portion of the gifts?

Read Acts 15. This is the story of a council held at Jerusalem in which a controversy over circumcision of new believers is resolved. The RCC claims that since Peter is the first specific apostle listed as speaking, he is the president of the council, and the chief apostle.

21. Was Peter the first to speak? (Verses 6-7)

22. Is anyone else specifically listed as speaking? (Verse 12)
23. Who announced the council's final decision (Who was the president of the council)? (Verses 13, 19)
24. Can we justifiably say that Acts 15 indicates any pre-eminence for Peter?
25. In Acts 8:14, what do we find about the mission of Peter and the city of Rome?
26. What does 2 Corinthians 12:11 indicate regarding the supremacy of Peter?
27. What does 1 Corinthians 12:28 say about the proper structure of the church, in particular with regard to the supremacy of Peter?
28. Does Peter regard himself as having any special rank or privilege beyond other church leaders? (1 Peter 5:1-2)

Peter is alleged to be the founder of the church in Rome. He then allegedly acted as its bishop, a title which later became extended to "Pope". This status requires that Peter be in residence in Rome to manage the affairs of the church. Read Romans 1:1-12

29. Would Paul have addressed the desire in verse 11 to the church of Peter?
30. What does 2 Timothy 4:9-16 say about the presence of Peter in Rome?
31. What may we infer from Galatians 2:7 regarding the likelihood of Peter establishing the church in Rome?

The Supremacy of Rome

Section 2: "Peter passed the authority granted him to an unbroken succession of Popes who are the supreme authority on earth over all believers."

The RCC insists that Peter was the first Pope, and passed the apostolic authority down to his successors. A list is published of this succession. The key feature of the succession is the idea that there is a single church organization and an ordered hierarchy of that organization. Without such an organization, the RCC schema fails. In modern discussion, this is argued as the visible versus the invisible body of believers. Put simply, the dispute is whether church membership in the terms of Jesus and the apostles depends on membership in an organization or membership in a body defined only by belief.

1. Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 are the only places where Jesus uses the word "church". What do these texts indicate about Jesus' intention for the word "church"?
2. What metaphor does Paul use in 1 Timothy 3:15 to describe the church? Does this give support to the RCC position? (see also 1 Peter 2:5,7)

3. The RCC alleges that the church in Rome was to be supreme. What does Paul indicate about the nature of the church in Rome? (Romans 16:1,5,23)

4. The book of Acts records the travels of the apostles and the early history of the church. What does Acts tell us about the nature of the church? (Acts 5:11, 8:1-3, 9:31, 11:22,26, 14:23,27, 15:3-4, 18:22, 20:17,28)

5. The RCC insists that the church in Rome was the sole repository of unadulterated truth. What does Paul tell us about this? (2 Timothy 2:2, 1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6)

The RCC Catechism (section 862) states "the bishops have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church, in such wise that whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and him who sent Christ". It also states (section 860) that "their office also has a permanent aspect". This is interpreted to mean that the Pope has the same apostolic connection to God that the apostles had. The RCC cites many church writings, Matthew 28:20, and Acts 20:28 in support of this position.

6. What conclusions may be properly drawn from these texts?

7. The RCC Catechism (section 882) declares that the Pope is the "Vicar of Christ", or Christ's substitute on earth. In essence, this says that Peter was Christ's substitute after the ascension. Who does Jesus say was to be his substitute? (John 14:25-26)

Resources:

The Roman Catholic Controversy, James R. White, Bethany House Publishers, 1996

Web Resources:

The Bible Light Homepage, <http://www.aloha.net/~mikesch>

This page contains a very wide range of well researched articles on Roman Catholic issues.