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FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF ST. PETER, APOSTLE

In today's gospel, Jesus asks Peter who the Son of Man is, and Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One—the Son of the living God!"

And Jesus then says:

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 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 (Mt 16.16-19).

Jesus uses three word-images or metaphors here: the rock, the keys, and the ropes. The first two word-images are explicit: the rock and the keys; and the third metaphor, that of the ropes, is implicit, since binding and loosing suggests the metaphor of ropes being tied and untied.

But what did these expressions mean to Jesus' hearers and especially to Peter himself?

It is clear that, in giving Simon a new name—Peter or Cephas, the Rock—Jesus was entrusting him with a unique and indispensable mission, as when Abram, our father in faith, was renamed Abraham. In recalling Israel to fidelity to the Lord's covenant, the prophet Isaiah even spoke of Abraham as the rock from which Israel was hewn:

Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance,
You who seek the LORD;
Look to the rock from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
And to Sarah who bore you;
For when he was but one, I called him,
And I blessed him and made him many (Is 51.1-2).

Of course, the Psalmist also says that God is "my Rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge" (Ps 18.1); Abraham is only a "rock" because he rests wholly on God, through unwavering faith in the Holy One who called him. In the writings of the rabbis, it was said that when God saw Abraham, the man of faith, God said, "Behold, I have found a rock on which I can build and establish the world." In Matthew 16.18, Jesus was applying Abraham's terms to Simon Peter; his hearers would have understood the implications.



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It was also Jewish tradition that the site of the Temple of Solomon was the very place where Abraham had bound Isaac to offer him in sacrifice (cf 2 Ch 3.1). For Israel, the sacrificial faith of Abraham is therefore the foundation of all sacrifice. The sacred rock under the Holy of Holies, representing the sacrifice of Abraham and God's promise to abide with his descendants, was the symbolic closing-stone of the gates of death and darkness. To entrust such a ministry to Peter is to say that the power of Satan would not prevail against Peter, that despite his human limitations, the promise of God himself would preserve Peter and the flock entrusted to him:

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 (Lk 22.31-32).

As St. Luke makes clear, Jesus spoke these words knowing that Peter could stumble, could even flee in fear in the hour of crisis: yet Jesus promised that Peter's faith would not fail, and that a penitent Peter would then confirm his brothers. Our Lord's allusions to the Temple and to the Holy of Holies also tell us that the ministry of Peter is itself priestly and sacrificial in nature.

Within the Church—the new Temple that is Christ's Mystical Body—Peter was entrusted with the power of the keys. The prophet Isaiah tells us of a man named Eliakim, who received the key-bearer of the king's household and his chief steward:

In that day, I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the palace of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open (Is 22.22).

And so, when Jesus gave Peter the power of the keys, he made Peter his chief steward, his vicar, entrusting to Peter a share in Christ's own authority and wide discretion in administering the Lord's household. The expression "binding and loosing" comes from the terminology of the rabbis. To bind and loose means to declare authoritatively what God's Law permits or disallows; this also includes the power of excommunication and of absolution.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see Peter acting as Christ's vicar in discharging all these roles. It is Peter who directs the selection of a successor to Judas (Acts 15.15-26). It is Peter who preaches the first Christian sermon at Pentecost, calling all to repentance and baptism (Acts 2). It is Peter who judges and punishes Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5); and it is Peter who opens the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 9-10). And at the Council of



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Jerusalem, it is the voice of Peter that ends the debate concerning the dispute about the status of the Mosaic Law for Gentile believers (Acts 15).

In essence, there is nothing in the later development of the Petrine office—that is, the papacy-- that is not already present implicitly in the words of Christ and in the primacy exercised by Peter in Jerusalem, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles. The “storming” of Rome through St. Paul’s missionary preaching (Acts 23.11) points to the subsequent development of the Catholic Church as the new universal People of God, whose new center is Rome, the imperial city itself. Already in his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells the Roman Church, “I thank God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world” (Ro 1.8). This Roman primacy would be confirmed and consecrated by the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the primacy of the See of Peter in Rome becomes even more evident: Pope St. Clement in A.D. 96 exercises primatial authority over the local church at Corinth and speaks of the Church’s hierarchical structure as God-given and as analogous to the Temple priesthood.

As to the Petrine office itself over the centuries: the forms and styles have changed over time, but the substance has remained constant. Even the sins and failings and lapses of Peter’s successors were already present in Peter himself.

And yet, it was to him that the Lord entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Why did our Savior do that? Perhaps because, as G.K. Chesterton said, the chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and the grace of God is in this way made all the more manifest.

Now there are many who find it difficult to see the essential continuity of the Petrine office under the external forms that a long history has given it. The best response I have seen comes from the pen of the Idealist philosopher George Santayana, a lapsed Catholic turned agnostic, who still retained a lingering affection and appreciation for the Catholic Church. These are his words in response to Modernist criticisms:

These principles [of Christ’s gospel] by their very nature could not become those of the world, but they could remain in it as a leaven and an ideal. As such, they remain to this day, and very efficaciously, in the Catholic Church. The Modernists talk a great deal of development, and they do not see that what they detest in the Church is a perfect development of its original essence; that monachism [monasticism], scholasticism, Jesuitism, ultramontanism [papalism], and Vaticanism are all thoroughly apostolic; beneath the overtones imposed by a series of ages, they give out the full and exact note of the New Testament. Much has been added, but nothing has been lost. Development (though those who talk most of it seem to forget it) is not the same as flux and dissolution. It is not a continuity through changes of any sort, but the evolution of something latent and preformed, or else the creation of new instruments of defence for the same original life. In this sense, there was an immense development of Christianity



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during the first three centuries, and this development has continued, more slowly, ever since, but only in the Roman Church... It is striking proof of the preservative power of readjustment that the Roman Church, in the midst of so many external transformations as it has undergone, still demands the same kind of faith that John the Baptist demanded, I mean faith in another world. The *mise-en-scène* [setting] has changed immensely. The gospel has been encased in theology, in ritual, in ecclesiastical authority, in conventional forms of charity, like some small bone in a gilded reliquary; but the relic for once is genuine, and the gospel has been preserved by those thick incrustations. Many an isolated fanatic or evangelical missionary in the slums shows a greater resemblance to the apostles in his outer situation than the pope does; but what mind-healer or revivalist nowadays preaches the doom of the natural world and its vanity, or the reversal of animal values, or the blessedness of poverty and chastity, or the inferiority of natural human bonds, or a contempt for lay philosophy? Yet in his palace full of pagan marbles, the pope actually preaches all this. It is here, and certainly not among the Modernists, that the gospel is still believed (from George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine*, chapter 2, "Modernism and Christianity").

So wrote George Santayana: such clarity of mind! I do hope that he made an Act of Contrition before he died. He certainly saw to the heart of the matter.

We are all aware of the various criticisms that have been made of the papacy and of the Catholic Church: not one of them is really new. Sometimes the criticisms sting, precisely because there are elements of truth in the scathing things that our opponents say against us.

Our reply to them is this: Peter is Christ's vicar, his chief steward, his representative: and yet, Peter is not Christ himself. Our ultimate faith is in the promise of Christ himself to be with us to the end of time. We know well what can be said against the Catholic Church and against the papacy: but in the end, we must reply with Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6.68).