

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH



From amongst his disciples Jesus chose twelve apostles to be the earthly leaders of His Church (Lk 6:12-16). He gave them his own authority to teach and to govern—not as dictators, but as loving pastors and fathers. That is why Catholics call their spiritual leaders “father.” In doing so we follow Paul’s example: “I became your father in Jesus Christ through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15).

The apostles, fulfilling Jesus’ will, ordained bishops, priests, and deacons and thus handed on their apostolic ministry to them—the fullest degree of ordination to the bishops, lesser degrees to the priests and deacons.

## The Pope and Bishops

(see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #880–883)

Jesus gave Peter special authority among the apostles (John 21:15–17) and signified this by changing his name from Simon to Peter, which means “rock” (John 1:42). He said Peter was to be the rock on which he would build his Church (Matt. 16:18).

“And Jesus answered him, ‘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 powers of death 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.’” (Matt 16:17-19)

In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, Simon’s new name was *Kepha* (which means a massive rock). Later this name was translated into Greek as *Petros* (John 1:42) and into English as Peter. Christ gave Peter alone the “keys of the kingdom” (Matt. 16:19) and promised that Peter’s decisions would be binding in heaven. He also gave similar power to the other apostles (Matt. 18:18), but only Peter was given the keys, symbols of his authority to rule the Church on earth in Jesus’ absence (see Isaiah 22:19-24 where Eliakim is appointed successor to Shebna as King Hezekiah’s chief minister and

representative, with authority being symbolically bestowed by “the key to the house of David” being placed on his shoulder. Eliakim is then called “father” to the people).

Christ, the Good Shepherd, called Peter to be the chief shepherd of his Church (John 21:15–17). He gave Peter the task of strengthening the other apostles in their faith, ensuring that they taught only what was true (Luke 22:31–32). Peter led the Church in proclaiming the gospel and making decisions (Acts 2:1–41, 15:7–12).

“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)

Early Christian writings tell us that Peter’s successors, the bishops of Rome (who have been called by the affectionate title of “pope,” which means “papa”, for at least 1500 years), continued to exercise Peter’s ministry in the Church.

“We are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors down to our own times.... But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall...[point] out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul – that church which has the tradition and the faith with which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world. And it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition. The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric...” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:3:1–3 [AD 190]).

The pope is the successor to Peter as bishop of Rome. The world’s other bishops (Greek: *episkopos*, “overseer”) are successors to the apostles in general.

“Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry” (Clement, *Letter to the Corinthians* 44:1–3 [AD 80]).

Successors of the Apostles, the Bishops of the particular Churches throughout the world form the College of Bishops. Individual bishops have charge of a particular diocese. Together as a group the Bishops may exercise power over the Universal Church by coming together in an ecumenical council (such as Vatican II), as the apostles and elders did around AD 50 with the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–21). However, even ecumenical council's must be recognized and agreed to by the successor of Peter to be valid. To the extent that the College of Bishops is not united with its visible head, the Pope, then it has no authority at all.

## **The Magisterium**

(see CCC 85–87, 888–892)

Together the pope and the bishops form the teaching authority of the Church, which is called the magisterium (from the Latin for "teacher"). The magisterium, guided and protected from error by the Holy Spirit, gives us certainty in matters of doctrine. The Church is the custodian of the Bible and faithfully and accurately proclaims its message, a task which God has empowered it to do.

Keep in mind that the Church came before the New Testament, not the New Testament before the Church. Divinely-inspired members of the Church wrote the books of the New Testament, just as divinely-inspired writers had written the Old Testament, and the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit to guard and interpret the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments.

Such an official interpreter is absolutely necessary if we are to understand the Bible properly. (We all know what the Constitution says, but we still need a Supreme Court to interpret what it *means*.)

The magisterium is infallible when it teaches officially because Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles and their successors "into all truth" (John 16:12–13).

## **Holy Orders**

Bishops and priests share specially in Christ's priesthood. In the Old Covenant, even though Israel was a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6), the Lord called certain men to a special priestly ministry (Exod. 19:22). In the New Covenant, even though Christians are a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:9), Jesus calls certain men to a special priestly ministry (Rom. 15:15–16).

"But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 15:15-16)

This sacrament is called holy orders. Through it priests (Greek: *presbuteros*, "elder") are ordained and empowered by their bishop to serve the Church (2 Tim. 1:6–7) as pastors, teachers, and spiritual fathers who heal, feed, and strengthen God's people—most importantly through preaching and the administration of the sacraments.

"Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control." (2 Tim. 1:6-7)

Deacons (Greek: *diakonos*, “servant”; see Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8) are also recipients of holy orders and serve the Church in various ministries. However they cannot perform the specifically priestly functions of confecting the Eucharist or absolving sins.

The offices of bishop, priest, and deacon are essential to the Church:

“In like manner let everyone respect the deacons as they would respect Jesus Christ, and just as they respect the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God and college of the apostles. Without these, it cannot be called a church.” (Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians* 3:1-2 [A.D. 110])

## Laity

The lay faithful are all those believers born again through baptism and incorporated into the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-14) but not called by God to ordained ministry within the Church. They belong to “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people” (1 Peter 2:9). The laity (Greek *laos*, “the people”), being immersed in the world, are called in a special way to bring Christ to the world.

Pope Pius XII said:

“Lay believers are the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the common Head, and of the bishops in communion with him. They are the Church” (*Discourse*, February 20, 1946).

## Religious Brothers and Sisters

Although not part of the ordained hierarchy, there also exists within the Church those who are called to live a life consecrated to God. We see its nascence in Saint Paul's call for virgins and widows to remain unmarried (1 Cor. 7:8-9) in order to serve the Lord, and in the Church community's responsibility to listed widows who have made a “pledge” to God (1 Tim. 5:5,9-10,12). The consecrated faithful profess the “evangelical counsels” of chastity, poverty and obedience under permanent vows as their state of life. This may take many forms, including monks and nuns (who are contemplatives), hermits, friars, and religious brothers and sisters (who are members of active orders). These faithful ordinarily live in community with each other according to rules established by their founders or superiors and approved by Rome.

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