

The Leadership of Peter

Every Sunday at Mass, Catholics throughout the world profess their common faith by praying together the ancient Nicene Creed. In that creed, we profess our faith in “One, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” The ministry of the pope, founded upon the ministry of St. Peter himself, is an essential and central component for preserving and promoting the Church’s unity, its holiness, its universality and its apostolic teaching.

God the Father revealed to Peter who Jesus is as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Because of his profession of faith, Jesus declared: “I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it” (*Matthew* 16:16-18). It is upon the rock of Peter’s profession of faith that the unity of the Apostles and the unity of the future Church were founded. So strong is Peter’s faith that not even the gates of hell – the lies and deceptions that the devil constantly attempts to weave within the fabric of the true faith – can conquer it.

Even though he knew that Peter would deny him, Jesus told him: “Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith will not fail, and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers” (*Luke* 22:31-12). It was Peter, after he and the other apostles received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who threw open the doors of the upper room on the first Pentecost and boldly proclaimed the one Gospel of Jesus Christ (see *Acts* 2:14-41). In his second letter, Peter confirmed that he was well aware of his responsibility as leader of the Church.

It is through his successors that Peter ensured that Christians would always be reminded of and so remember the one true Gospel. Moreover, Peter, in the person of the pope, is constantly called to strengthen his brother bishops and in so doing guaranteeing and fostering the unity of faith. As Peter says in his first letter, “Tend the flock of God in your midst” (1 *Peter* 5:2). Thus, all Christians, throughout the centuries, are made one with Christ and his Church by professing the one true faith of Peter and the apostles, that is, that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and Savior of the world. This is why the Second Vatican Council stated that the pope, as the

bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23).

Peter joyfully exhorted his readers to live holy lives after the manner of Jesus: "Be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct" (1 *Peter* 1:159). All Christians share in the priesthood of Christ and so form, according to Peter, a holy nation giving worship and praise to God (see 1 *Peter* 2:1-10). The pope and the bishops in union with him share fully in the priesthood of Christ and so ensure that the Church remains and grows in holiness, for they, through their priesthood, are stewards of grace.

Thus, the pope, as leader of the Church, is ultimately responsible for its holiness. He promotes the holiness of the Church in two essential ways. Firstly, he, as did Peter, constantly calls the members of the Church to turn away from sin and to lead holy lives. In order to do this, the pope must always ensure that the faithful know what is morally good and right so that they may live holy and virtuous lives of faith. Likewise, he must constantly warn them against false arguments and immoral actions that would deprive them of their dignity as holy men and women by leading them into sin and evil. Secondly, the pope is the supreme guardian and promoter of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist, as the fountains of grace through which all Christians truly worship the all holy God.

The Church of Jesus Christ is Catholic, meaning that it is universal. As head of the Church, Jesus shepherds the whole universal Church, and he does so in a special way through Peter and his successors. After his resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved him. In response to Peter's threefold affirmation that he did indeed love him, Jesus said to him: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep" (*John* 21:15-17). This sacred charge now falls upon every pope – he is the chief shepherd and pastor of the universal Church. He fulfills his task in many ways. Four will be mentioned here.

Firstly, the pope ensures that, throughout history, Jesus, as the one Savior and Lord, is proclaimed universally, to all peoples and nations. As Peter himself proclaimed: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor in there any other name under

heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved" (*Acts of the Apostles* 4:12).

Secondly, as the supreme pastor who transcends all nations and ethnicities, the pope is the living sign that what truly unites us as brothers and sisters is our common faith in Jesus and membership in his universal Church, a Church that knows no boundaries or borders.

Thirdly, the pope, as the chief shepherd, appoints bishops throughout the whole world who join him in caring for the entire flock of Jesus Christ.

Fourthly, the pope, in his own authority and with that shared with his brother bishops, governs the universal Church so that all the various graces and charisms of its many members work together for the building up of the entire body of Christ. As Jesus told Peter: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (*Matthew* 16:19).

As Catholics, we believe that we share the same faith as that of the Apostles and thus our faith is apostolic. How can we be sure, given all of the twists and turns of history, with all its countless philosophies and religious beliefs, that what we believe and live today is actually the same Gospel revealed by Jesus and proclaimed by Peter and the apostles? The answer to this question lies in the Church's belief that Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, has conferred upon the pope and the bishops united with him the grace to teach infallibly the Gospel of Jesus - what pertains to the truth of faith and morals. The pope, as the successor of Peter, and "as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful" (*Lumen Gentium*) embodies this grace in singular manner. Thus, we can confidently profess and joyfully proclaim our faith because, by being united to the pope, our faith is the faith of Peter and all of the apostles.

The leadership of the pope finds its source and example in Peter, who was appointed by Jesus himself to be the head of the apostles. We have seen that this papal leadership involves maintaining and promoting the unity, the holiness, the universality and the apostolicity of the Church. It is Jesus who is the source of this unity, holiness, universality and apostolicity, and thus to listen to and obey the voice

of Peter in every age is to listen to and obey Jesus himself.

(Father Weinandy, a Capuchin Franciscan, serves as executive director for the Secretariat for Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He earned his doctorate in historical theology at King's College, London, and previously served as a lecturer and tutor in history and doctrine at the University of Oxford. He has written or edited 15 books and a number of scholarly articles.)