



The Papal election in the Year of Faith invites reflection

The papal election in the Year of Faith invites reflection on the Catholic belief that the pope is the successor to St. Peter as Bishop of Rome and head of the Church on earth. Three classic Gospel texts support this claim.

**Matthew 16:16-19.** “You are Peter,” Jesus says to Simon, “and upon this rock I will build my church.” (English fails to capture our Lord’s word play in the original Aramaic: “You are Cephas and on this cephas.” In French it’s “You are Pierre and on this pierre.”) No other apostle receives a new name. Jesus singles out Simon. To the faith of this fluctuating, impulsive disciple Jesus promises to give rock-solid, foundational strength, sufficient to weather the stormy seas of history and overcome the very power of hell. Jesus then entrusts to Peter “the keys of the kingdom” and the power they bring to bind and loose on earth and in heaven. A Protestant scripture scholar explains: “Just as in Isaiah 22:22 the Lord lays the keys of the house of David on the shoulders of the servant Eliakim, so Jesus commits to Peter the keys to his house, the Kingdom of Heaven, and thereby installs him as administrator of the house.” As holder of the keys, as chief steward of Christ’s household, Peter will exercise Jesus’ kingly authority to judge behavior as worthy or unworthy of the children of

God. As chief teacher of the faith (an office we see him exercise dramatically in the Acts of the Apostles), Peter is “the guarantor of the story of Jesus” to those who did not walk with him to his cross and resurrection. Of all the apostles, Peter is appointed first and in a uniquely prominent way. The others are to act together with him, but not without him.

**Luke 22:31-32.** Once more Jesus publicly singles out Peter in a scene of high drama, the Last Supper. “Simon, . . . I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” In the solemn context of the first Mass, knowing full well of Peter’s impending denials, Jesus publicly selects Peter to strengthen the Eucharistic unity of the apostles he will send to spread it throughout the world. Perhaps our Lord thought back to the reaction of “many of his disciples” on the day when he revealed himself as the Bread of Life: they “drew back and no longer walked with him” (John 6). Jesus asked the Twelve if the saying was too hard for them as well, if they too would go away. At this decisive moment Peter stepped forth to give voice to their answer: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

**John 21:15-17.** This intimate, shore-side conversation between the Risen Jesus and Peter occurs right after the miraculous catch of 153 fish that leaves Peter’s net strained but not torn. Three times Jesus asks the disciple who had three times denied knowing him, “do you love me?” Three times Peter answers yes. But the words he hears from Jesus—“Feed my sheep”—suddenly re-direct

the trajectory of his life: the fisherman must leave the sea behind and set his feet on shore as the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

“Follow me,” Jesus says. And Peter does. But Jesus did not come to leave his “sheep without a shepherd” at Peter’s passing or his brethren with no one to strengthen them with the keys to the kingdom. The logic of the ministry that Jesus entrusted to Peter demands that he have a successor. This is why Catholics believe the pope lives in Rome.