

# A Shepherd for the Flock

## *Why Do Catholics Have a Pope?*

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In most churches, there is a pastor who leads the congregation on behalf of the Lord. The Catholic Church is the same way. We are one church spread across the world, and the pope is our lead pastor. Jesus set it up this way, giving Peter special authority to lead the Church after Jesus returned to heaven. Jesus would work through Peter and his successors to keep his Church united and faithful to the Gospel.

### **When did Jesus make Peter the leader of the Church?**

In Matthew 16, Jesus promises to build his Church upon Peter. He will give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, with powers to loose and to bind in his name. (Matthew 16:18-19) These are terms associated with the royal steward, who in the Old Testament would lead the kingdom on behalf of Israel's king. As the king of heaven, Jesus calls Peter to be his royal steward, leading the Church on his behalf. Jesus later reaffirms this special calling, commanding Peter three times, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17) Peter's leadership can be seen throughout the Acts of the Apostles, especially in Acts 15.

### **Wouldn't this leadership role end once Peter dies?**

The royal steward was an ongoing office, because the king would always need a steward. Jesus intended Peter's office to continue through each generation, for he knew his flock would always need a visible shepherd. The "keys" of authority will be passed from generation to generation. Peter was the first bishop of Rome, and all of the popes are his successors as bishop of Rome. The other bishops continue the ministry of the apostles, too, and work with the pope.

### **Can the Pope teach whatever he wants?**

No, the pope is not like a medieval king, able to do or teach whatever he likes on a whim. He cannot make up new teachings or change the Gospel; his duty is to ensure that we are staying faithful to the truths of our Christian faith. When questions arise about an important issue of faith or morals, God can work through the pope and bishops to clarify the question and keep the Church united in truth, as in Acts 15.

### **Haven't there been many sinful popes over the years?**

Of the 266 popes so far, most have been good and holy leaders, thanks be to God! There are eight or so popes who are infamous for living sinful and hypocritical lives. Catholics find this disappointing, but not a surprise. Our leaders are human beings, with a need for God's mercy and healing like the rest of us. Jesus did not promise that Peter and his successors would be sinless, but that he would guide the Church through the centuries, despite human weakness and sin.

### **Can't Christians decide for themselves what is true or false?**

Remember that Jesus taught only one Gospel, and the truths he revealed enable us to be united with him in love, now and in eternity. Thus, the truths of Christianity are not created by personal opinion or changed by popular vote; rather, they are treasures to be received with humility and joyfully lived out. Jesus left us a living family of faith, led by a visible shepherd, in order that his teaching may be proclaimed clearly and fully in every generation, so that we may know the truth, and the truth shall set us free. (John 8:32)

