

By What Authority does the Pope Rule Over the Catholic Church?

The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, "supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls". The Pope is the Bishop of Rome, who exercises universal jurisdiction over the whole Church as the Vicar of Christ and the Successor of St. Peter. 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).

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.

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).

Early Christian writings tell us that Peter's successors, the bishops of Rome (who from the earliest times have been called by the affectionate title of "pope," which means "papa"), continued to exercise Peter's ministry in the Church.

The term "pope" derives from the Latin for "father," papa (Greek, pappas), also used to refer to bishops and to priests in the Orthodox Churches. The Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria is also known by the title "pope." But in Western Christianity, this term refers exclusively to the Roman Pontiff, called His Holiness the Pope, who governs the universal Church as the successor to St. Peter. "The office uniquely committed by the Lord to Peter, the first of the Apostles, and to be transmitted to his successors, abides in the Bishop of the Church of Rome," who is "head of the College of Bishops, the Vicar of Christ, and the Pastor of the Universal Church," and who possesses "by virtue of his office, . . . supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary jurisdiction power in the Church" (Canon 331).

The Pope is assisted in carrying out his office by the bishops, the cardinals and the various offices of the Roman Curia. The Pope also has an enormously important international role, as visible symbol of the unity of the Church and as a universally acknowledged spokesman for justice, for world peace, for morality, for the dignity of the human person and for the transcendent meaning of all life on earth. In recent years, this role has been exercised in particular through pastoral visits to many countries of the world by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II [and currently Pope Benedict XVI].

The pope is the successor to Peter as bishop of Rome. The world's other bishops are successors to the apostles in general.

Catholicism Frequently Asked Questions from the Transporter Information Services. Special thanks to Fr. Francis Peffley.

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