

The Rock of the Church

By **Matthew Briel, Ph.D.**

August 23, 2020 – Twenty-First Sunday Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 22.19-23; Romans 11.33-36; Matthew 16.13-20

In Matthew's Gospel, Peter is notoriously impetuous (e.g. rushing out on the water, only to sink when he loses heart) and weak in his faith (e.g. denying Christ in the high priest's courtyard). Shortly after today's Gospel, Jesus himself calls Peter "Satan." Why did Matthew include today's awesome conferral of the keys with these seemingly contradictory stories about Peter? How could Peter be the rock of the Church if he is such a weak man? Did Matthew forget the other scenes in his Gospel when he wrote today's words? Or are they the introduction of a later editor? Certainly, Matthew was no fool, and even if some of these stories were introduced by a later editor, they form part of the canon of scripture that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Instead, the Church, as can be seen in her choice to pair the reading from Romans with this Gospel, seems to present to us a paradox that comes from the unsearchable ways of God.

Traditionally, the Church has read these passages in Matthew as indicating a distinction between the office of Peter and the man. The singular role of Peter among the Apostles is emphasized again and again in the Gospels (e.g. Luke 22, John 21) and especially in the Acts of the Apostles, since it displays, in the words of the Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Soloviev, "the practical leadership on the Part of Peter in every matter which concerned the universal Church." This office is handed on to Peter's successors, the bishops of Rome. (C.C.C. 882, 892).

The Authority of Peter

The powers given to Peter by Christ and developed—that is, unfolded from revelation—in the course of the Church's history are so encompassing that the English statesman William Gladstone wrote, just after the First Vatican Council, that Catholics have no "mental and moral freedom" in the face of the authority of the Pope. Is this true? The Catholic claims about the Pope, as recorded in the Catechism, are strong indeed: "For the Roman Pontiff . . . has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered" (C.C.C. 882).

Two questions are worth considering when we try to understand the Church's doctrine about the office of the Pope that was established by Christ and recorded in today's Gospel reading. First, why are the Church and, in turn, the Pope given such great authority? Second, what is the role of the conscience in relation to that authority? St. John Henry Newman is helpful in answering both questions.

Newman begins his 1849 discourse on faith and doubt by stating categorically that one either has faith or does not. Faith does not allow for caveats. Thus, the one who says, "I believe as far as I can tell, but there may be arguments in the background which will change my view," such a man has not faith at all." Reflecting on the Christians described in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the New Testament, Newman argues in his discourse on private judgment that God did not speak directly to them or to us today, but rather through messengers, living authorities to whom believers either submit their reason or not. The first Christians came to the Apostles not to argue, but to learn. Now, of course, one can enquire into the office of the Apostles and the inheritors of their office, the bishops, but once their authority is accepted, it is accepted.

This is true even of the highly educated philosophers or teachers of the law in the early Church and among Newman's friends, fellows of Oxford, who, upon converting to Catholicism, needed to submit their minds "to living men, who have not their own cultivation or depth of intellect, and . . . receive a number of doctrines, whether they will or no, which are strange to their imagination and difficult to their reason." The claim of the Church is that God is true and has chosen the Church as the medium for communicating his truth. (Compare this point with Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I.1-9). The Magisterium of the Catholic Church must be infallible if we are to know without error what God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

Twenty-five years later, Newman, in his Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, continues his reflections on the authority of the Church as it is seen in the office of Peter. Newman first compares the Pope's authority to that of the secular law: the Pope does not regulate all aspects of faith and morals, but rather has authority over any aspect. This is crucial. Just as civil law does not rule over our every action, but can determine the lawful boundaries of any action, so the Pope can speak authoritatively about all of our actions. Newman stresses here the vast swath of human activities on which the Pope has not made pronouncements.

The Question of Conscience and Papal Authority

Newman then engages the thorny issue of conscience on questions that have been taught by the Pope, but not in an infallible manner. Newman is clear—and he cites a number of authoritative theologians to support his position—that the Pope does not have the authority ". . . to command anything against Holy Scripture, or the articles of faith, or the truth of the Sacraments, or the commands of the natural or divine law . . ." Although it is the habit of the Catholic not to use his private judgment, his conscience may, rarely and in extraordinary emergencies, come to a different conclusion than a Pope.

Today, it seems, disagreements with papal and magisterial teachings are more frequent than rare and extraordinary emergencies. Why is this so? The key might be found in Newman's diagnosis of a mistaken notion of conscience that was common in the late nineteenth century and is perhaps even more prevalent today. "When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand . . . [each] to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases." Conscience, in this sense, is not the external echo of the voice of God in my heart, but rather my own willfulness. There is a danger today that we may, in examining our conscience, in fact be consulting our own will, rather than our true conscience.

What is conscience, then, for Newman? It is, citing Augustine and Aquinas, ". . . the Divine Reason or Will of God, commanding the observance, forbidding the disturbance, of the natural order of things . . . [it is] an impression of the Divine Light in us, a participation of the eternal law in the rational creature." Conscience, then, is an authority external to myself and my will that is refracted in passing into my intellect. As God's law, it must be obeyed. Conscience, however, can be malformed. It needs training, a lifelong task, that must "be guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church" (C.C.C. 1785).

With the conscience, as with the Papacy, the Catholic is called to obedience, "the surrender of the intellect and will." This is, to say the least, disconcerting to our contemporaries and led Gladstone, as it does many today, to consider Catholics mental and moral slaves. Catholics can respond to this criticism in a variety of ways. One popular way is, in the name of freedom, to arrogate to oneself the right to determine the truth and falsehood of the various doctrines of the Church. This, however, as Newman said, often employs a false notion of conscience that is in fact self-will. The fundamental question is therefore this: Is the Church truly the chosen instrument by which God makes himself known? If so, why would God leave us with an imperfect authority, throwing us back upon ourselves and our private judgment to understand him? If God speaks to us through a messenger, that messenger must have some authority, some promise must have been made that the Lord will not leave us in confusion. "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it."

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, #871-945*
- *St. John Henry Newman, "[Faith and Private Judgment](#)," in Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*
- *St. John Henry Newman, [Letter to the Duke of Norfolk](#)*
- *Ray Ryland, "[Soloviev's Amen: A Russian Orthodox Argument for the Papacy](#)"*
- *Vladimir Soloviev, [The Russian Church and the Papacy](#)*

In Short . . .

- *Jesus, as recorded in scripture, clearly gives Peter a central place in the Church.*
- *The authority Jesus confers is an office, not a personal quality. This can be seen in scripture's portrayal of Peter.*
- *The Pope, the Bishop of Rome, is the successor of Peter and inherits his office.*
- *Jesus establishes Peter as the rock of the Church, in part, to provide his disciples with an authoritative teacher of Revelation.*
- *This authority does not negate human freedom, but rather guides Christians to the truth that sets them free (John 8.32).*
- *Conscience must be obeyed in all things, but it can err and must be formed. It is not to be confused with self-will. It is rather authoritative because it is the voice of God as refracted in our intellects.*