

Successful Succession **The Continuity of Apostolic Authority in the Church**

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by Steve Kellmeyer

If the Eucharist is the heart of the Catholic faith, then apostolic succession is her backbone. For nearly two millennia, the divine power given to the apostles by Jesus Christ is the means through which we, the Body of Christ, have received the power of the sacraments; it is also the principle by which we are assured of the Holy Spirit's infallible guidance. When the apostolic successors teach in union with their leader, Peter's successor, we have perfect certainty that God speaks to us today even as He spoke to His disciples 2,000 years ago.

Yet, when our separated brethren are faced with this doctrine, they often reject it as an invention and a tradition of men. "Jesus alone is our head!" is their cry, "Every Christian carries the authority of the Holy Spirit!" Citing 1 John 2:27, they insist they need no one to teach them anything, for the anointing of the Holy Spirit is sufficient. Even if Jesus had given His authority to the twelve who followed Him—a disputed point among them—His authority most certainly died with them. That kind of divine authority cannot be delegated by man.

Their misunderstanding comes from a basic misunderstanding concerning the meaning of "apostle." The word "apostle" simply means "one who is sent." It is crucial to note both exactly who carries this designation and when they are so designated. For instance, of the four Gospels, the twelve are only called apostles in only two of the Gospels, Mark and Luke. While Peter calls himself an apostle in both Petrine epistles, and Paul calls himself an apostle in nine of his letters, the critical usages are seen in Acts and Hebrews. For the first 13 chapters of Acts, no one except the twelve is called "apostle." The designation "apostle" widens only after chapter 12, the imprisonment of Peter.

The Peter Principle (or “Like a Rock”)

Peter’s imprisonment is interesting precisely because it is, in a certain sense, the culmination of his mission as head of the apostles. In Acts 12, God reminds the reader of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ Passion and death. Consider the similarities: During both Jesus’ and Peter’s ministries a close companion is beheaded (in Jesus’ case, John the Baptist, in Peter’s case, James)—the only two beheadings in the entire New Testament. Both Jesus and Peter were arrested during the week of unleavened bread. Both were cast into prison. Jesus was crucified between two thieves, Peter imprisoned between two guards. Mary stood in prayer at the foot of the Cross, the whole Church prayed for Peter. Jesus was pierced in the side by a lance, Peter was struck in the side by an angel. Both were released from prison and/or death by the power of God. After each left their respective prisons, each was first met by women. In both cases, the women went to tell the other apostles and disciples of the miraculous event, and in both cases the women were not believed: Jesus was thought to be a ghost, Peter, an angel. After the truth of the event was made clear, Jesus ascended into heaven, and Peter “went to another place” (Acts 12:17).

In fact, after Acts 12:17, we won’t see Peter again, except for one appearance in Acts 15, when his declaration before the Council of Jerusalem precipitates the council’s decision. As a result, the council will say that it “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” not only to give the Christian communities certain written conciliar orders, but to send authorized interpreters of the New Testament Scripture they had just written. The Holy Spirit inspired the council to send Judas and Silas as witnesses. God found such witnesses necessary to orally confirm the truth and explain the application of the New Testament Scripture the apostles, the elders and God intended the Christian communities

to receive. In short, Peter's appearance and role at the council strongly resembles the Holy Spirit's appearance and role at Pentecost: As the Holy Spirit gave Peter the impetus to speak in Acts 2, so Peter gives James the impetus to speak in Acts (cf. Acts 15:14).

Paul and Barnabas are called apostles in Acts 14 only after Peter's correspondence to Jesus is described in Acts 12. The Judaizers' lack of authority precipitated the problem: "we [the council] gave them no instructions" (Acts 15:24). Though both Paul and Barnabas are apostles, and even though Jesus specifically and directly gave Paul the task of carrying the Gospel to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13, 15:16; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:8), Paul and Barnabas cannot decide the issue concerning Gentiles and circumcision on their own authority (Acts 15:1-2). They do not have the authority necessary to fully carry out the mission God entrusted to them. Instead, they must refer the matter to the council of apostles and the elders in Jerusalem, men appointed by the twelve. Unlike the Judaizers, unlike even Barnabas and Paul, the twelve and the council of elders they appointed carry an authority which is both final and equivalent to that of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 15:28). Where did they get this divine power?

On a Mission from God

The key to correct understanding lies in the letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1). Jesus is the First Apostle—the One who is sent from the Father. If the whole of the Bible is about Jesus, then the whole of the Bible is also about apostleship. When we combine Hebrews 3:1 with Matthew 28:18, we see that the Apostle Jesus carries all authority there is. That is, when the Father sent His Son as an apostle into the world, He sent Him with all authority on heaven and earth—an authority so complete that it included both the ability to choose His own apostolic

successors and to imbue them with the same authority with which the Father had imbued Him.

Immediately after Jesus' Passion, death, and Resurrection (the aftershock of which resonates uniquely with Peter in Acts 12), Jesus appears to the apostles and commissions them: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn. 20:21). They will receive the divine power to carry out this commission later, when they are clothed with power from on high (Lk. 24:49), at Pentecost (Acts 2:4). Jesus Christ carries the full divine authority of God the Father, because God the Father sent Him into the world with that full authority. Jesus Christ, doing all and only what He sees the Father do (cf. Jn 5:19), gives the full divine authority of God the Father to the twelve exactly as He Himself received it from the Father. Just as Jesus had the power to appoint apostles with the fullness of divine authority, so these twelve who carry the full authority of God the Father likewise have the ability to appoint apostles with that same authority.

The Unbreakable Chain

This is confirmed in Scripture. Acts 15:28 bears witness to the authority that the elders carried—an authority which allowed them to list themselves not just alongside the divinely authorized apostles, but also alongside the Holy Spirit, divinity Himself, in the conciliar decrees of Acts 15. While Acts 14:23 shows that the Apostles Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church, Paul insists in Acts 20:17, 28 that these same elders were appointed not by him but by the Holy Spirit. If Jesus is the first generation apostle, and the twelve are the second, then these men of the third apostolic generation, the elders appointed by apostolic authority, likewise carry the authority of "apostle"—one who is sent by God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit and who carry the full divine authority of the Father.

The elders appoint a fourth generation in turn, witnessed in 1 Timothy 4:14, when Paul encourages Timothy to remember the gift that was given him “by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you.” The men the elders consecrate carry “all authority” (Tit. 2:15) and are to take care in how they themselves lay hands on others (1 Tim. 5:22). Thus, Scripture witnesses not one, not two, not three, but *four* distinct generations of apostolic successors, and the fourth generation continues to carry “all authority,” just as the first generation, Jesus, does. Further, the fourth generation’s office is expected to be passed down to a fifth generation whose existence lies in the post-scriptural narrative of history. These men carry this authority because their consecration through the laying on of hands is the conduit through which Jesus’ authority flows out into the world.

The authority of God the Father is carried in the hands of men because it was first carried in the hands of the God-Man, Jesus. This authority remains unbroken through the New Testament. The New Testament’s authority, like the New Testament Scripture carried by Judas and Silas, is itself grounded on the strength of “two or three witnesses.” The twelve, the councils of elders, and their divinely appointed successors divinely appoint men in every generation to serve as witnesses through the prophetic utterance given in the laying on of hands. These consecrated men are the apostolic successors, the bishops of the Catholic Church. Because of these divinely authorized men, the church is truly the pillar and foundation of the truth (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15).

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