

# From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

Written by Bill Dunn - Published by Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Harwinton, Conn.

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## Does the Church Need a Pope?

Nowadays many people think the papacy is an outdated, old fashioned tradition. It is thought that here in the 21st century, since we live in modern, democratic times, the Catholic faithful would be better served by locally elected church leaders, rather than a single leader who is not even from our country.

To understand why the Church needs a Pope, we must understand the history of the papacy. During His time on earth, Jesus created His Church and selected Simon Peter to be her first leader. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He was. Simon Peter boldly stepped forward and said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah...I say to you, you are Peter (which means 'Rock') and upon this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:15-19).

In the New Testament, there are numerous instances where Peter is clearly shown to be the leader of the apostles. At the end of John's gospel, Jesus commissioned Peter by asking him three times, "Do you love me?" Jesus also instructed Peter three times to "tend my sheep" (John 21:15-17). It is very likely Jesus asked the question and gave the instruction three separate times to symbolically counteract Peter's three separate denials of the Lord. Jesus clearly charged Peter with the crucial task of being the spiritual shepherd of the believers.

At the Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts, chapter 15, many of the apostles and presbyters (priests) gathered to debate important Church practices. The discussions finally ended when Peter stood up and addressed the entire group. When he was finished proclaiming what the Church should do, Scripture explains, "The whole assembly fell silent." (Acts 15:6-12.)

There is no doubt about the primacy of Peter. He was the leader of the apostles, and the leader of the fledgling Christian church in the 1st century.

It is clear from Scripture that Jesus founded a church, His Church, and then selected one man, St. Peter, to be this new Church's earthly leader. The question we must ask ourselves is this: after St. Peter died, did Jesus still want His Church to continue to have an earthly leader? The answer should be obvious. The very same reasons Jesus appointed one man to be the head of the Church—leadership, unity, and final authority on matters of doctrines and practices—were still valid reasons after St.

Peter died. And those reasons are still valid today, twenty centuries later.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that the papacy exists as a sign of unity. In Section 882 we read: "The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful." This is in keeping with the prayer Jesus offered for all believers on the night of the Last Supper: "I pray...for those who will believe in me through [the disciples'] word, so that they may all be one" (John 17:20-21).

Just imagine if from the very beginning each small group of believers had been allowed to make their own rules and vote on which doctrines they felt like following. Within a few generations the Christian church would have been unrecognizable. The core beliefs and practices would have been completely different from city to city, nation to nation. The result would have been not unity, but chaos. Those who claimed to follow Christ would not have been, as Jesus prayed, "one."

However, the Church did not follow a democratic model. She followed Jesus' instructions to implement a hierarchical structure, so as to preserve the unity of believers and the purity of the doctrines. This is why you can attend Catholic Mass on any continent around the globe and the essentials will be the same. The doctrinal beliefs and the liturgical celebrations are unified.

Some people bristle at the idea of Papal Infallibility, and ask questions such as: "How can the Church claim the Pope is sinless and never makes a mistake?"

Papal Infallibility is a very narrowly defined concept, and has nothing to do with the Pope's personal goodness or sinfulness. In fact, the late Pope John Paul II was renowned for going to Confession at least once per week. He knew that he, like everyone else, was not perfect and needed God's forgiveness and grace. Infallibility only applies when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* (from the Chair) on matters of faith and morals for the whole Church. Infallibility does not give the Pope something new. It allows him to protect something old: the deposit of faith handed down by the apostles.

So, getting back to the original question, "Does the Church really need a Pope?" The answer is absolutely yes. The Pope helps to keep the Church unified, and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Pope preserves the full deposit of the Christian faith handed down by Jesus and the apostles.