"You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." -Matt. 16:18-19

"If someone does not hold fast to the unity of Peter, can he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he desert the chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, can he still be confident that he is in the Church?" -St. Cyprian of Carthage (c. 251 AD), *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, 4

1. The Principle of Unity

Even in Old Testament times, the Israelite people were organized around a hierarchical structure that gave solidity and unity to their religious expression. Israelite worship was centered around the institutions of the High Priest, the Aaronic priesthood, and the Levites. These institutions were supplemented in post-Exilic times by the addition of an entire class of scribes and rabbis. This whole religious structure was centered on the Temple in Jerusalem, where animal sacrifice was offered day and night to God. The Temple institutions came from God Himself and, besides being the means the Israelites used to worship God, were also a principle of unity for the Israelite nation and the Temple and the continuation of the High Priesthood were signs of God's abiding presence with the people of Israel.

The Aaronic priesthood was instituted by God Himself, but as the offerings of the Aaronic priesthood were imperfect (being the blood of goats and bulls); God prophesied that one day a new priesthood would emerge to supplant and fulfill the old. God said through Isaiah: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?…I delight not in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats…bring no more vain offerings (Isa. 1:10-12). A new priesthood was prophesied, one that would offer a "pure offering," not according to Aaron, but "according to the order of Melchizedek" (Mal. 1:11; Ps. 110:4).

When Christ came, he did not abolish the Old Testament priesthood but fulfilled and transfigured it, so that the blood of animals was no longer offered by sinful men, but instead the spotless blood of the Lamb was offered by none other than Christ Himself. He is the only acceptable offering and He is the only acceptable High Priest. Every Catholic priest shares in His priesthood by offering to God the sacrifice of Christ.

2. The Institution of the Papacy

The Pope (from Latin, *papa*) is the temporal head of the Church on earth. His authority comes directly from Christ and he rules the Church in Christ's name. The first head of the Church on earth was St. Peter, and the powers of the papacy are granted to him in the following famous verse from Matthew 16:

And Jesus came into the quarters of Caesarea Philippi: and he asked his disciples, saying: "Whom do men say that the Son of man is?" But they said: "Some John the Baptist, and other

some Elias, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Jesus saith to them: "But whom do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said: "Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answering said to him: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt. 16:13-19).

This power granted to St. Peter is called "the power of the keys." The same power is granted collectively to all of the Apostles later on in Matthew (18:18) but the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" are given to Peter individually. By this, the Church has always understood that the Bishops collectively hold the power of the keys, but only insofar as they are in unity with the head of the Apostles, the successor of St. Peter:

On [Peter] He builds the Church, and to him he gives the command to feed His sheep, and although He assigns a like power to all the apostles, yet He founded a single chair, and He established by His own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity. Indeed, the others were that also which Peter was, **but a primacy is given to Peter, whereby it is made clear that there is but one Church and one chair…(**St. Cyprian, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, 4 AD 251).

3. The Powers of the Pope

There are several elements of power granted to Peter that must be examined individually. First, the foundation of the Church upon Peter; second, the promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against it; third, the power of binding and loosing.

When Christ founds the Church upon Peter, He is establishing a new hierarchical structure for the people of God, no longer based on fleshly descent from the house of Aaron, but a spiritual household based on unity with Peter and his successors.

The promise of Christ that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church is the biblical basis for two beliefs concerning the teaching authority of the pope and the Church: first, that the teaching of the Church will always be true. Christ tells His disciples in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears Me, and he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me." This means that Christ always speaks the truth; therefore, whoever hears Christ speaking through the Apostles is guaranteed to always hear the truth. Thus, the Church can never err in her official teaching, for if the Church of God teaches error, then the gates of hell have prevailed.

The second teaching regarding the gates of hell never prevailing is that the Church is *indefectible*, which means that she will always exist. The Catholic Church will remain on earth until the end of time, and no force can wipe her out.

Christ also speaks of the power of binding and loosing. This means that whatever the Church, in

unity with the Pope, declares is ratified by heaven. Therefore, the commands of the Church must be obeyed with the obedience due to God and those whom He has appointed. Keep in mind though that the hierarchy is the servant of revelation and not its master; the pope does not have the authority to teach or "bind" anyone to anything that is not passed on in Divine Revelation and the Traditions of the Church. The Church does not teach what it wants; it teaches what is true, and because it only teaches the truth everything it teaches can be believed in faith, for it is God Himself who guarantees the veracity of the Church's claims.

4. Peter in the Scriptures

Peter's primacy is spoken of in many places in the Scriptures under many different figures of speech. Consider the following facts:

- Peter is **always listed first** in every list of the Apostles (Matt. 10:2-4, Mark 3:14-19, Luke 6:12-16). We know these lists are not chronological, because in time Andrew was called before Peter (John 1:40). That Peter comes first shows his preeminence.
- **Jesus preaches from Peter's boat** (Luke 5:3), indicating that if one wants to see Christ and hear His words, they must come to the boat of Peter.
- Peter **alone walks on the water** with Christ (Matt. 14:22-33). When he begins to sink, Christ saves him, indicating that if Peter or his successors should ever start to fail, Christ will step in and prevent them.
- In the Gospel of John, **it is to Peter that Jesus gives the commandment "Feed My sheep,"** indicating that it is part of Peter's mission to be a shepherd to the Church (John 21:15-19).
- In the Gospel of Luke, it is written that **Jesus prayed for Peter so that his "faith may not fail"** (Luke 22:32); by this we understand that the faith of Peter (and his successors) is unable to fail (infallible) because Christ Himself has prayed for Peter and God always hears Christ.

The Church has always understood these Scriptures to teach that when Peter proclaims the faith of the Church in his position as Head of the Universal Church that he is free from error in matters of faith and morals.

5. Papal Infallibility

The infallible nature of the papacy was always believed in the Church, as it was evident from the Scriptures themselves. This teaching was formally defined at the First Vatican Council in 1870, which stated:

We teach and define that it is a dogma Divinely revealed that the Roman pontiff when he speaks ex cathedra, that is when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, by the Divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals, and that therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves and not from the consent of the Church irreformable.

Thus, there are five conditions to infallibility:

1) "The Roman Pontiff": the declaration is made by the pope.
2) "Speaks ex cathedra": he is speaking in his capacity as Pope, Head of the Universal Church
3) "He defines": he intends to make a definition. Usually, a form such as “We declare” is used.
4) "That a doctrine concerning faith or morals": infallibility protects only statements made concerning faith or morals; i.e., those things that pertain to the Catholic Faith.
5) "Must be held by the whole Church": he is addressing the Universal Church, not one specific group or an individual.

It might be good to look at what infallibility is and is not:

Papal Infallibility IS:

- A guarantee that the Pope will never *publicly teach* error as the official teaching of the Church.’
- A special gift of the Holy Spirit belonging to the office of the papacy.
- A gift pertaining to matters of faith and morals.

Papal Infallibility IS NOT:

- A guarantee that the Pope will never *privately* believe error.
- A guarantee that the Pope will never sin.
- Able to be invoked on matters outside of faith and morals (science, politics).
- A guarantee that the Pope will always say the right thing at the right time
- A guarantee that the Pope will never make a bad decision.

6. The Hierarchy

The hierarchy refers to the institutional governmental structure of the Church. It is different from the sacrament of Holy Orders, because while the sacrament has only three degrees (deacon, priest, bishop), the hierarchy has many more degrees and levels of authority, but many of these degrees of authority have their origin in positive ecclesiastical law and not from divine law.

Starting at the bottom there are pastors, parochial vicars and deacons, then bishops auxiliary bishops and archbishops, then monsignors, cardinals (and there are several types of cardinals), prefects of different Vatican congregations, various Curial officials and finally the Pope himself. Each has their own canonical duties and obligations.

- **Pastor**: The priest of a parish Church, addressed by the title “Reverend” or “Father.”
- **Parochial Vicar**: Assistant of the pastor, also a priest, also called “Reverend” of

"Father."

- **Vicar**: a priest in acting as a spokesperson or diocesan official for a particular region within a diocese. The Vicar of the Washtenaw region is the pastor of St. Joseph's in Dexter.
- **Vicar General**: a deputy of the bishop for the entire diocese, like a second-in-command.
- **Ordinary**: the bishop of a diocese, addressed as "Excellency" or "Your Excellency."
- **Auxiliary Bishop**: another bishop who assists the Ordinary if the diocese is particularly large or populous; also addressed as "Excellency."
- **Archbishop**: a bishop over a particularly large or important diocese. He is also the titular head of other bishops in the same area. For example, the Archbishop of Detroit (Cardinal Maida) takes preeminence over the Bishops of Lansing, Gaylord, Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids.
- **Metropolitan**: another name for an Archbishop.
- **Nuncio**: an ambassador from the Vatican to a political state or organization.
- **Legate**: a messenger of the Pope to a state or other part of the Church with the authority to act in the Pope's name.
- **Monsignor**: an honorary title conferred directly by the Pope (there are 14 sub-categories of Monsignor) on a cleric of special esteem or renown, addressed as "Monsignor."
- **Cardinal**: a senior member of the hierarchy who has the authority to vote in papal elections. There are three degrees of Cardinal (Cardinals over eighty years old may not vote in papal elections). They are referred to as "Your Eminence."
- **Prefect**: the head of an important Church Congregation or Vatican office.
- **Patriarch:** the bishop of an extremely ancient diocese (Venice, Jerusalem, Antioch).
- **Pope**: the Bishop of the city of Rome, referred to as "Your Holiness" or "His Holiness," or affectionately as "Holy Father."

7. The Diocese

A "diocese" is the administrative territorial unit of the Roman Catholic Church governed by a bishop and as such is the key unit of authority in Church governance. There are 2014 dioceses and 569 archdioceses (as of 2003). A diocese may be very small (the city of Rome), or extremely large (like the diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Montana, which encompasses the entire state of Montana).

The word and concept of a diocese comes from the late Roman Empire. The Emperor Diocletian (r.285-305) split the Roman Empire up into four regions governed by four Caesars under him, with each region being further subdivided into smaller units called diocese. As the Roman Empire collapsed in the 5th century, the Church took over the existing civil administrative units and adapted them to ecclesiastical usage. The word diocese comes from the ancient Greek *diokesis*, which means province

8. Conclusion

"Sacramental ministry in the Church, then, is a service exercised in the name of Christ. It has a personal character and a collegial form. This is evidenced by the bonds between the episcopal

college and its head, the successor of St. Peter, and in the relationship between the bishop's pastoral responsibility for his particular church and the common solicitude of the episcopal college for the universal Church… 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."[402] "For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered." (CCC 879, 882)

For Further Reading:

Ps. 110
Isa 1:10-12
Matt. 16:13-19
John 21:15-19
Luke 22:30-32
St. Cyrpain, The Unity of the Catholic Church (251 AD)
First Vatican Council, *Pastor Aeternus* (1870)
Catechism of the Catholic Church § 871-896
Scott Butler & Norman Dahlgren, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys* (Queenship Publishing: Goleta, CA, 1997)
Frank Sheed, *Theology for Beginners*, chapter 13