

Sts. Peter and Paul, Apostles  
St. Matthew 16:13-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Pope Leo X, in a bull titled *Decet Romanum Pontificem* on January 3, 1521, excommunicated Martin Luther from the Catholic Church, as well as any who follow his teachings, whom this bull labeled Lutheran. The last part of the missive cites the authority which Leo uses to perform such excommunications. There, he wrote,

No one whatsoever may infringe this our written decision, declaration, precept, injunction, assignation, will, decree; or rashly contravene it. Should anyone dare to attempt such a thing, let him know that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul.

It's possible that this bull, as well as Leo's earlier bull, *Exsurge Domine*, in which he commanded Luther to recant his teaching, served as part of the influence in writing *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word*. There were later events that certainly gave cause to the hymn, not the least of which was an alliance that gave the impression that the Pope and Turk—read, Mohammedan or Muslim—were allied against the Church! Catherine Winkworth, prolific in translating many hymns into English, altered the first stanza to the way we now sing it, but Luther wrote it a little closer to this:

Lord, keep us in Thy Word and work  
Restrain the murd'rous Pope and Turk  
Who fain would tear from off Thy throne  
Christ Jesus, Thy beloved Son. (from the 1918 Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book)

Still, the Catholic Church, which would come to be called Roman Catholic nearly a century later, claims the authority of Peter and Paul as the founding of their church. More specifically, the Bishop of Rome, who would call himself pope, claimed to be carrying with him and his office the authority they claim was given to Peter to head the Church on earth. Peter is the foremost of all of Jesus' apostles. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles. These two men have been and still are seen as the two greatest men in the Church since the Ascension of Jesus. Therefore, the papal church appeal to these for their foundation and papal authority.

Of course, Rome bases this authority given to Peter on how they explain the interaction that took place in today's Gospel lesson. There, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that He is. "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets," come the answers. Jesus is reckoned by the people to be a prophet, or the return of a prophet, which was to usher in the messianic age. "But what about you?" Jesus asks. "You've been with me for nearly three years now. Who do you say that I am?" Peter speaks up, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." "Blessed are you, Simon. I now call you Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

Peter is a name in Greek which stems from the words *petra* or *petros*, meaning rock or stone. Simon, son of Jonah, had just given a rock-solid confession, and Jesus gives Him the name Rock. How did Peter know to say this? It didn't just come to Him, but it was given to Him by the Father. How did the Father give this answer to Peter? Well, he had been walking for nearly three years with the incarnate Rock of all Ages, sitting at His feet and learning. It was St. Paul who once called Jesus the Rock. (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:4) But you also have Jesus calling Himself a stumbling stone and the Stone that the builders rejected (cf. Matthew 21:42-44), which both St. Peter and St. Paul echo. (cf. Romans 9:32-33; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6-8) So we believe, teach, and confess—as the Scriptures tell us—that Jesus is the Rock and that Peter confessed this truth in today's Gospel reading when He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He spoke on behalf of the entire Church, for this is the Church's confession.

But Rome rejects this and says that in today's text, Jesus is setting Peter up to be the chief bishop of His Church and thereby gives him all authority in the Church on earth, which carries with it eternal repercussions, of course. They see Peter as being the only one who receives the keys of heaven,

which is the authority to bind on earth so that it is likewise bound in heaven. Now, any man who assumes the office of Peter takes the title Holy Father in the Romish church, and with it the authority they presume to assign to Peter based on their understanding of today's text. To this day, the coat of arms of the papacy bears on it a set of keys as a result. This is also why Peter is often pictured as a concierge in jokes about heaven.

We, of course, point to the night of the resurrection to interpret the last verse of today's text. For on that night, the disciples were in the room behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Jesus appears among them, breathes on them and tells them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:22b-23) There, the authority to bind and loose sins as validly as it were to be done in heaven is not limited to Peter, but is given to all of Jesus' sent ones. So, to this day, this Office of the Keys is a peculiar office given to the Church and exercised in Her by Her called and ordained pastors. But, let's also be clear: you, dear hearers, also have authority to forgive sins, that is those committed against you, and when your brother or sister leaves truly forgiven, you have won them back. (cf. Matthew 18:15)

We can be thankful to God for Catherine Winkworth. She has given us wonderful translations of many hymns originally written in German. But, I would contend that the alteration she made to Luther's hymn is something we might consider undoing—that the original, polemical language Luther used is still valid today.

For one thing, the Turk, or Mohammedan or Muslim, is still a murderous tyrant, hell-bent on throwing Jesus off of His throne, as evidenced by the brutal slaying of Christians and the desecration and torching of Christian churches in Muslim-controlled lands in the Middle-east and Northern Africa. The Muslim is, after all, a holy warrior in his mind, whose purpose is to set up the everlasting kingdom of his god, Allah, on this earth. This "One World Under Islam," which can be called a Caliphate, entails ruthlessly subjugating and slaughtering those who do not believe in Allah.

The pope, on the other hand, while he doesn't take (or no longer takes) the lives of simple Christian folks, he is a threat to solid Christian teaching, thereby threatening the eternal lives of simple Christian folks—he tosses Jesus off the throne by claiming the seat as his own; this is why our Confessions refer to the papacy as the Antichrist. (cf. Apology XV, 18; Power and Primacy of the Pope, 39; et al) Why is the papacy antichrist? Because the pope seeks to take from Christ His redemptive work and put the onus of your salvation on you, at the pope's own discretion. The papacy's Sacrifice of the Mass is a good example, in which the Romish church declares the Lord's Supper a sacrifice performed to gain God's favor rather than the body and blood freely given from Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice on the cross for your salvation.

The pope's murder, while more subtle, is far more dangerous than the Muslim's. "[D]o not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28) Anything antichrist—or contrary to Christ—leads to death, eternal death. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6) Despite all of this, the pope cites Peter as his authority which he uses to lead people from Jesus and salvation to a way that leads to death and damnation. Jesus said,

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes! (Matthew 18:6-7)

Does that mean that all in the Romish church are damned? Absolutely not! Even the man in the papal office may be saved, it's not given to me or you to save or damn anyone, but we are left to question whether any Roman Catholic, be they pope or parishioner, truly believes as they teach and confess. So long as their belief, teaching, and confession run counter to Christ, they are in danger of hellfire—but this is true of anyone with any label, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Mohammedan or anything.

The Church is not built on Peter or Paul. A church built on a mere man is a building built on sand, and a house built on sand is doomed to fall. (cf. Matthew 7:26-27) The Church is built on the Rock, Jesus Christ, and built on this Rock, it will never fall. (cf. Matthew 7:24-25) Jesus is the sure, certain, and solid cornerstone out of which everything that is our faith is built. He is the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundation as their work is based on Jesus Christ and Him Crucified. (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:2) And you, as the church, are built on this foundation of Jesus and the prophets and apostles:

[Y]ou are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Building a church on a mere man is not a danger unique to the Romish church. It happens among us as well. If you are here because you like me or relate well to me or like my voice or you find me full of charisma, I'm flattered. However, any one of those better not be the only reason that you fill a seat in this place. If so, you are here for the wrong reason and are doomed to fall on the last day, like the house built on sand. Come because this place is founded on the rock-solid confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, because Jesus Christ and Him crucified for your salvation is proclaimed here.

It works the other way around, too. Perhaps you don't like to come here or would rather not come here because you don't like me or don't relate well to me or find my voice grating or find me dull and boring or don't like the way I do a certain thing. Whatever! Such criticism will just roll off my back (or it should). However, as long as Jesus Christ and Him crucified is proclaimed from these lips, then this is a place built upon the rock-solid confession of that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In that case, your refusal to come is folly, and you will fall like the house built on sand.

The Rock upon which the Church is founded is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. What does it mean for Him to be called Christ or Messiah? Namely this: He was anointed from eternity to bear our sin and be our Savior. (cf. Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20) In being anointed to bear our sin, Jesus was sent to Earth—took on human flesh and blood like ours—to die. The Church, very specifically then, is built on the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. This is the sum and whole of Jesus' teaching. To this all of the Prophets looked forward and spoke. To this all of the Apostles attest and wrote. Upon this you stand, by faith grasping the merits that Jesus won for you on the tree of the cross, trusting only in these for your salvation.

Your hope is not that some mere man with man-made authority will free you from the bonds of sin or from some middle place after death. Your sins are finally and fully forgiven in the death of Jesus Christ. He has freed you from all iniquity, regardless of what some pope may say. Unless you wish to hold on to your sins, binding them to you, they are loosed—they no longer hang around your neck like a millstone.

That is what it means to celebrate this feast of Sts. Peter and Paul—to confess what they have confessed, as the Church throughout time has confessed: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And when Jesus comes again, He comes to take you to Himself to be where He is for eternity. This is your sure and certain, rock-solid confession, because, in the right, sure, certain, and God-given exercise of the keys, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.