

Module One

Peter and the Keys

Unless Someone Guides Me

A standalone session. Run it any time after Session Four.

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Peter's singular role is not built on one verse but on a pattern running through all four Gospels and Acts, and learns exactly what the Church claims for the papal office and exactly what she does not.

Catholic Touchstone. The office is a promise about the preservation of the Church's teaching, not a claim about the holiness or cleverness of the man holding it. Catholics who understand that distinction can face the whole history of the papacy without flinching.

Session Four established the Isaiah 22 background and the council at Jerusalem. This module goes further: the pattern across the New Testament, what Vatican I actually defined, and the hard history. It assumes Session Four but can be run on its own with fifteen minutes of setup.

What You Need to Know

The pattern, not the proof text

Peter is named first in every formal list of the apostles, at Matthew 10:2-4, Mark 3:16-19, Luke 6:14-16 and Acts 1:13, and Matthew 10:2 goes out of its way to call him first, which is odd in a list where nobody else is numbered. John gives no formal list of the Twelve, but he gives Peter the same prominence by other means: the naming at John 1:42, the confession on behalf of the Twelve at John 6:68-69, and the threefold commission at John 21:15-17. He is named far more often than any other apostle. He speaks for the group repeatedly, walks on the water, is the one Christ teaches from in the boat, is the first to preach at Pentecost, works the first healing, receives the vision that opens the Church to the Gentiles, and is the one whose shadow the crowds seek. A person who has never heard of the papacy, reading Acts straight through, will notice a man out in front.

Three scenes are singular. At Caesarea Philippi he alone is solemnly identified as the rock, under the new name Christ had already promised him at John 1:42, and he alone is given the keys. He is the only apostle Christ renames, and the name is an office, not a nickname. At the Last Supper Christ tells him that Satan has demanded to sift the apostles like wheat, and then says that he has prayed for Peter in particular, that his faith may not fail, and that when he has turned again he must strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:31-32). Note the grammar carefully: the sifting is plural, the prayer is singular, and the commission is to strengthen the others. After the Resurrection, the man who denied three times is asked three times whether he loves Christ and told three times to feed the flock (John 21:15-17).

What Vatican I actually defined

This is the most useful five minutes you will spend, because most objections are aimed at a claim the Church has never made. The First Vatican Council in 1870 defined that the Roman Pontiff teaches

infallibly when four conditions hold together: he speaks (ex cathedra), that is, in the exercise of his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians; he acts by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority; he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals; and he does so as to be held by the whole Church.

What follows from those four conditions is a long list of things not covered: a pope's private theological opinions, his interviews, his personal conduct, his political judgments, his disciplinary decisions, his prudential calls about war or economics, and his choice of appointments. The charism is a negative protection, preserving the Church from being taught error under those specific conditions. It is not inspiration, it does not produce new revelation, and it does not make the man wise.

The history we tell ourselves

Do not let your group meet these facts from a hostile source first. Pope Honorius I was condemned by name by the Third Council of Constantinople in 681 for his handling of the monothelite controversy, and later popes ratified that condemnation. There were popes of scandalous personal life, Alexander VI being the usual example. There was a period when rival claimants each commanded the allegiance of whole nations, and saints were found on opposing sides. Some other cases often cited, such as the pressure placed on Pope Liberius in the fourth century, are genuinely disputed by historians and you should not present them with more confidence than the sources allow.

The honest Catholic response is not to explain these away. It is to notice that none of them involves a pope defining a doctrine of faith under the four conditions, and to say that the claim has always been narrower than its critics assume and narrower than some enthusiastic Catholics have implied.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.” **Isaiah 22:22**

The steward's office in the Davidic court is the pattern: a single man, an installed office, a transmissible authority, a paternal title. Consider also the pattern of renaming in Genesis, where Abram becomes Abraham and Jacob becomes Israel. In Scripture a new name from God signals a new role in his plan, and it is not given casually.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Jerome

Letter 15, to Pope Damasus, around 376 (summary)

Writing to Rome from the East during a contested succession in Antioch, Jerome asks Damasus to tell him with whom he should be in communion, and says he is joined in communion with the chair of Peter.

What makes this useful is who is speaking. Jerome is the great critical scholar of his age, not a man given to flattery, and he is writing from a distance about a practical problem: which of several claimants is the real bishop? His instinct is to write to Rome and abide by the answer.

Summary of the letter's substance; the communion sentence is in section 2. Read it there before you quote it.

Voice of the Church

The Fathers of Chalcedon

At the reading of Leo's Tome, 451

When the doctrinal letter of Pope St. Leo was read at the Council of Chalcedon, the assembled bishops

acclaimed it, and the acclamation recorded in the acts includes the cry that Peter had spoken through Leo.

Represent this carefully and it is powerful; overstate it and you will be caught. The bishops examined the Tome against the faith rather than accepting it unread, which is exactly what the Catholic position expects. What the acclamation shows is how the see of Rome was regarded, not that the council thought examination unnecessary.

The acclamation is preserved in the conciliar acts; presented as summary.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed

Arguing against the Donatists, Augustine appeals to the unbroken order of bishops in the Roman see, running from Peter forward, as a publicly checkable fact that his opponents cannot match.

The argument's force depends entirely on the list being common knowledge and verifiable in the fourth century. He is not revealing something; he is pointing at something everyone already knew.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 552-553 on the keys and the power to bind and loose.
- CCC 880-887 on the college of bishops with the Roman Pontiff as its head.
- CCC 891 on infallibility, which summarizes the definition in its own words and speaks of the Pope proclaiming a doctrine by a definitive act as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful. The fourfold statement of the conditions is Vatican I, Pastor aeternus, chapter 4. Learn both precisely, and keep them distinct; together they settle most arguments before they start.
- CCC 892 covers the ordinary teaching of the Magisterium and the religious assent owed to it, which is a real obligation and a different one. Do not blur 891 and 892 together.

Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can name at least four ways Peter is singled out across the Gospels and Acts.
- 2. Every participant can state from memory the four conditions defined at Vatican I in Pastor aeternus, chapter 4, and can say how CCC 891 summarizes them.
- 3. Every participant can name at least two genuine failures in papal history and explain why they do not touch the defined claim.
- 4. Nobody leaves believing that Catholics think the Pope cannot sin or cannot be wrong.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"Peter was never in Rome."

Handle at the level the evidence supports. 1 Peter 5:13 sends greetings from Babylon, which the early tradition read as Rome, and Revelation uses Babylon the same way. Irenaeus states it plainly, that Peter and Paul preached at Rome and founded the church there (Against Heresies 3.3.2), writing around 180. The earlier witnesses are less explicit but converge: 1 Clement, written from Rome in the 90s, holds up the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul as belonging to its own memory without naming the city, and Ignatius, writing to the Roman church around 107, appeals to Peter and Paul as men who had given that church commands. Present this as

an early and convergent tradition, not as eyewitness testimony.

The archaeological material under St. Peter's is suggestive and is treated as such by careful scholars; do not oversell it. The literary evidence is early, unanimous, and uncontested by any competing city claiming his tomb, which is the strongest form of the argument.

"Honorius was a heretic pope, so infallibility is false."

Concede the condemnation immediately; it is in the acts of an ecumenical council and Catholics gain nothing by fighting it.

Then apply the four conditions. Honorius wrote official papal letters to Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople, in reply to a formal inquiry in a live controversy. His language was careless and his counsel was to drop the competing formulas rather than settle the question, and the council condemned him for that failure. What he did not do is define a doctrine *ex cathedra*, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, to be held by the whole Church. Do not call the letters private; they were not, and you do not need them to be. The case is actually evidence for the Catholic position, since the Church was able to condemn a pope, which a Church that thought popes personally impeccable could not have done.

"Paul rebuked Peter, so Peter had no authority over him."

Galatians 2:11 is real and we should quote it ourselves. Note what Paul objects to: Peter's conduct, his withdrawal from table fellowship, not his teaching. Paul says he stood condemned because he was not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel in practice.

A subordinate can rebuke a superior for behaviour, and saints have done it repeatedly, St. Catherine of Siena being the famous case. The rebuke presupposes the office matters.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you chose a fisherman who failed you badly and made him the rock. Give us confidence in your promises rather than in ourselves, and charity toward the men you have placed over us. Amen.

Win

1. Have you ever been given responsibility you knew you were not equal to? What happened?
2. What is the first thing you think of when you hear the word pope? Be honest.

Build

Live discovery. Give the group four passages and ask them to note everything said about Peter specifically: Matthew 10:1-4, Luke 22:31-32, John 21:15-17, and Acts 2:14 and 10:1-48. Fifteen minutes.

3. What did you find?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Named first in the list and explicitly called first. Prayed for by name while the sifting is aimed at all of them, then told to strengthen the others. Asked three times and given the flock. Preaching first at Pentecost. Receiving the vision that opens the door to the Gentiles.

Draw out the Luke 22 grammar if they miss it: Satan asks for all of you, I have prayed for you singular, and you must strengthen your brothers. The singling out is in the sentence structure.

4. Read CCC 891 aloud, slowly, twice, and read the four conditions from Vatican I beside it. What are the conditions, how does the Catechism put them, and what is left out?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Speaking as pastor and teacher of all Christians, by virtue of supreme apostolic authority, defining a doctrine of faith or morals, to be held by the whole Church.

Left out: opinions, interviews, conduct, politics, prudential judgments, appointments, discipline. Have them list these out loud. Most people arguing about the papacy have never heard the definition.

5. Given all that, what does it mean that Honorius was condemned by an ecumenical council?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That the Church can and did condemn a pope, which tells you the claim was never personal impeccability. Honorius answered Patriarch Sergius in official letters and answered badly; what he never did was define anything for the whole Church.

Let the group sit with the fact that the Church preserved this in her own conciliar records rather than burying it.

DIG DEEPER: What the office is for

Luke 22:32 gives the purpose in six words: when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.

The office exists to hold the others together, and it is given to a man who is told in advance that he will fail

and return. That order matters.

The Steelman

The strongest form of the objection.

If Christ established a visible head with universal authority, the first three centuries should be full of appeals to him, and they are not. Churches settled disputes locally, councils were called by emperors, and the great doctrinal controversies were fought out among bishops across the empire. Rome is respected, certainly, as the church of the capital and of two martyred apostles, but respect is not jurisdiction.

What the record actually shows is a primacy of honour growing slowly into a claim of power, helped along by the collapse of imperial authority in the West. That is a perfectly natural historical development, and it does not require a promise from Christ to explain it.

6. What is true in that, and where does the Catholic case actually stand?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

True: the office as exercised in the second century does not look like the office as exercised in the nineteenth, and pretending otherwise is indefensible. Development is real and Catholics should own the word rather than fear it.

What the case rests on: Clement of Rome intervening in Corinth around 96 and expecting compliance. Ignatius addressing the Roman church in distinctive terms. Irenaeus pointing to Rome as the reference point for apostolic teaching. Jerome writing from the East to ask Rome whom to be in communion with. Chalcedon acclaiming Leo. Keep the data and the reading of the data apart, out loud. The data: Clement of Rome writes to Corinth around 96, unasked, and expects to be heeded, and says so at the end of the letter; Ignatius greets the Roman church around 107 in language he uses for no other church he writes to; Irenaeus around 180 points to Rome as the church with which the others must agree (Against Heresies 3.3.2), and the key phrase there is disputed among translators; Jerome writes from the East to ask Rome whom to be in communion with; Chalcedon acclaims Leo. The Catholic reading is that this is a real primacy already being exercised. Our interlocutor reads the same texts as prestige and moral weight, not jurisdiction, and that reading has to be answered with argument rather than waved off. What cannot be maintained is that the texts are silent, or that Rome's standing was invented in 1870.

The honest formulation: the seed is in Matthew 16, the practice is visible early, and the articulation develops. That is how doctrine works generally, including doctrines our interlocutor holds, such as the Trinity, whose formal vocabulary is also later than the New Testament.

Send

7. Does the papacy make the faith easier or harder for you? Say the true answer.
8. What would change if you prayed for the Pope regularly?

Live It This Week

- Memorize the four conditions in CCC 891.
- Read Luke 22:31-34 and John 21:15-19 together, in that order.
- Pray for the Pope by name daily this week.

Closing Prayer

Father, you build on people who fail. Thank you for keeping your Church through men who were not worthy of her, and for keeping us through the same mercy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Memory Verse

“But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” **Luke 22:32**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Isaiah 22:22, the key on the shoulder
- Matthew 10:1-4, Peter named first
- Matthew 16:13-19, the keys
- John 1:42, you shall be called Cephas
- Luke 22:31-32, I have prayed for you (memory verse at v. 32)
- John 21:15-17, feed my sheep
- Acts 2:14, Peter preaches first
- Acts 10:1-48, the vision and the Gentiles
- 1 Peter 5:13, greetings from Babylon
- Galatians 2:11, the rebuke at Antioch

Catechism: CCC 552-553, 880-887, 891, 892.

Historical: Vatican I, 1870, the four conditions. Third Council of Constantinople, 681, on Honorius. Council of Chalcedon, 451.