

Session 3 of 8 | Until the End of the Age

The Keys of the Kingdom

Peter's office in Christ's Church

What did Jesus entrust to Peter, and why does the Church say that responsibility did not die with him?

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the keys in Matthew 16 are built on an Old Testament royal office, that Jesus repeatedly gives Peter a task the others do not receive, and that an office from Christ is not a claim that its holder is sinless.

Catholic Touchstone. Christ made Peter the visible source and foundation of the Church's unity, and that office continues in the bishops of Rome. Peter belongs with the other Apostles, as the pope belongs with the college of bishops. (CCC 880-882; Lumen Gentium, 18, 20, 22.)

What You Need to Know

Matthew 16 puts Peter's commission right after his confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus is the one who builds the Church. Whatever Peter receives, he receives from Christ and depends on Christ for it. The keys do not make Peter the owner of the kingdom. They make him a steward in it.

Isaiah 22 is the background for the keys. Eliakim is given "the key of the house of David" and authority to open and shut, as the chief steward of the royal household. He is not the king. He runs the king's house on the king's behalf, and the office continues when he leaves it. The parallel illuminates Matthew 16. It does not prove every later detail of the papacy, and not every feature of Eliakim's story transfers to Peter. Say both things.

Christians disagree about what "this rock" refers to: Peter himself, his confession, or Christ. The group should know that the commission in verse 19 does not depend on settling that debate. "I will give you the keys" is addressed to Simon Peter personally, in the singular. So is the authority to bind and loose in that verse. Whatever the rock is, the keys are Peter's.

John 21 and Luke 22 fill out the picture. The risen Jesus entrusts his sheep to Peter three times. The sheep remain Christ's. Before the Passion Jesus tells Peter that Satan will sift them, that he has prayed for Peter, and that Peter, once turned back, is to strengthen his brothers. An office from Christ and a failure by the man who holds it appear in the same breath. Catholic teaching concerns an office established by Christ, not a claim that its holders are personally sinless. (CCC 880-882; 891; Lumen Gentium, 18-22; 25.)

Terms, in plain words

- **Primacy:** the first place among the bishops that belongs to the bishop of Rome as Peter's successor. It is a real authority, not only a title of honor.

- **Infallibility:** the Spirit's protection from error when the pope, or the bishops with him, definitively proclaim a teaching on faith or morals. It is narrow, conditioned, and does not cover a pope's opinions, decisions, or personal conduct. (CCC 891.)
- **Steward:** a servant who runs the household on the owner's behalf.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 22:19-23. Shebna is removed and Eliakim is installed over the royal household with the key of the house of David: "he shall open, and none shall shut." The office is real, delegated, and continues past its holder. Verses 24 and 25 add that Eliakim's own peg will one day give way. Do not hide that. The Church's teaching rests on Christ's commission read within apostolic Tradition, not on Isaiah alone.

Keep this distinction | leader only

Do not reduce Peter to a substitute for Christ. Do not reduce the pope to an honorary spokesman either. Catholic teaching affirms a real primacy of jurisdiction, exercised as service to Christ's Church and always together with the college of bishops (*Lumen Gentium*, 22). Keep three things separate all night: primacy, personal holiness, and infallible teaching.

Voices of the Church

Pope Benedict XVI

Summary: In his catechesis on Peter, Benedict reads the three images Jesus gives him, the rock, the keys, and the power to bind and loose, as one particular responsibility within the Church. Peter is made the foundation of the Church's faith and unity, and his ministry serves that faith and communion.

General Audience, 7 June 2006

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Summary: Irenaeus singles out the Church of Rome, founded and organized by Peter and Paul, as the church with which every church must agree because of its preeminent authority. He then lists its bishops from Linus down to his own day. This is an early witness to Rome's place, not a full statement of later papal definitions.

Against Heresies, III.3.2-3

Second Vatican Council

Summary: Just as Peter and the other Apostles formed one apostolic college, so the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, and the bishops, successors of the Apostles, are joined together. The college has authority only together with its head, and the pope's full, supreme, and universal power over the Church is preserved.

Lumen Gentium, 22

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 552-553.** Peter's first place among the Twelve, and the keys as a specific authority.
- **CCC 880-882.** Peter and the college; the pope as the visible source and foundation of unity.

- **CCC 891.** The precise conditions of infallible teaching.
- **CCC 1444.** Binding and loosing given to Peter and also to the college united with its head.

Session Goals

1. Explain why the keys describe delegated, continuing authority, using Isaiah 22.
2. Read Peter's office inside his confession of Christ, so that faith in Christ and the office Christ gives are not rivals.
3. Distinguish primacy, personal holiness, and infallible teaching, and say what infallibility does not cover.

Thread Watch | leader only

Keep the sealed guesses closed. Thread A develops: Peter receives something the others do not, which is the sharpest case of "office" in the study. Plant the phrase "steward, not owner." Next week joins office, teaching, and concrete judgments in Acts 15.

Timed Plan | 75 to 90 minutes

Clock	Segment	If you only have 60
0 to 8	Opening prayer and Win	One Win question
8 to 28	Build, Questions 1 and 2, with the live discovery	Keep
28 to 48	Build, Questions 3 to 5	Drop Question 5. Assign Matthew 16:21-23 for home
48 to 60	The objection, built then pressed	Keep
60 to 70	Send and Live It This Week	One Send question
70 to 75	Memory verse and closing prayer	Keep

For 90 minutes, let the Build discussion breathe and add the Dig Deeper passage at the end.

OBJECTION BENCH | leader only. Answers for questions that may come up. Do not read aloud.

If someone says: *Eliakim's peg gives way in Isaiah 22:25. If that is the model, the office fails.*

You can answer: Good catch, and the passage says exactly that. The comparison is about the shape of the office, a steward with the master's key, not about the fate of one holder. Luke 22 makes the same point from the other direction. Peter will fail personally and still be told to strengthen his brothers.

If someone says: *The rock is Peter's confession, or it is Christ. Peter is just a small stone.*

You can answer: Read verse 19. "I will give you the keys" is singular and addressed to Simon. So is "whatever you bind." Whatever the rock is, the keys are given to a person, and the Catholic case does not depend on winning the debate over the rock.

If someone says: *Peter was corrected by Paul at Antioch and denied Jesus three times. Some rock.*

You can answer: Yes, and Jesus predicted the denial in the same conversation where he gave Peter the job (Luke 22:31-32). Catholic teaching has never claimed popes are sinless or always right in what they do. Infallibility is narrow: definitive teaching on faith and morals, under conditions. It does not cover Peter's table manners at Antioch.

If someone says: *Nothing in Matthew says the office passes to the bishops of Rome.*

You can answer: Correct. Matthew gives the commission; it does not give a succession plan. The claim that Peter's office continues in Rome rests on that commission read with the Church's Tradition, witnessed by Irenaeus around 180 and defined by the Church. The argument is cumulative, and we say so out loud in the response tonight.

Answers at a Glance

One line per question, for the leader who needs to check quickly during the night. Full answers are in Part Two.

1. Peter confesses Christ; Christ builds; Peter alone receives the keys and binding and loosing in verse 19.
2. Isaiah 22: Eliakim holds the king's key as steward. Delegated, real, continuing. Not the king.
3. John 21: three times, "feed my sheep." The sheep stay Christ's. Peter is shepherd under the Shepherd.
4. Luke 22: Peter will fail, Jesus prays for him, and he is to strengthen the brothers. Office and weakness together.
5. Matthew 16:21-23: the man just given the keys is called Satan. The office survives the correction of the man.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Read aloud everything marked SAY, ASK, and READ. Keep everything marked LEADER to yourself. Share each parchment box only after the group has talked.

Opening Prayer

SAY Lord Jesus, keep your Church united in the truth. Give the pope and all the bishops courage to serve you faithfully. Help us receive your word without pride and speak of other Christians with charity. Amen.

Win | Begin with experience

LEADER *Invite brief responses. Anyone may pass. Take one question if time is short.*

ASK 1. What is the difference between owning something and being entrusted to care for it?

ASK 2. When a group disagrees, what makes an authority trustworthy enough to settle it?

Build | Let the text lead

READ Read Matthew 16:13-19.

ASK 1. What does Peter confess? Who says he will build the Church? What is given to Peter, and is it given to him alone in verse 19?

LEADER *Have someone reread verse 19 and count the pronouns. They are all singular.*

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Peter confesses Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus says "I will build my church." Then he gives Peter the keys of the kingdom and authority to bind and loose. In verse 19 every pronoun is singular. Whatever we make of "this rock," the keys are given to Simon Peter.

Peter's confession and Peter's office should not be pulled apart, as if the Church had to choose between faith in Christ and the responsibility Christ gives. The office comes from the confession and depends on the one confessed.

Live Discovery

SAY Look in Isaiah for an official who is given the key of the house of David. Read the whole appointment, not only the sentence with the key in it.

LEADER *Allow a short search. Supply Isaiah 22:19-23 only if the group is stuck. Then have someone read the passage the group found.*

ASK 2. What kind of responsibility comes with the key in this passage? How does it help you read Matthew 16?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Eliakim is placed over the royal household as steward. He holds the key of the house of David. "He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." He is not the king. He runs the king's house on the king's behalf, with real authority, and the office outlasts the man. That is what a key means in the ancient Near East. It helps us read the keys given to Peter as delegated, continuing authority in Christ's kingdom. The parallel illuminates Matthew's image. It does not, by itself, settle every question about the papacy.

READ Read John 21:15-17.

ASK 3. Whose sheep does Peter receive? What does Jesus ask him before giving them to him, and how many times?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

They are Jesus' sheep: "feed my lambs," "tend my sheep." Three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him, matching the three denials, and three times gives him the flock. Peter's office is pastoral service under the Good Shepherd, not independent ownership. The Church teaches that this shepherding responsibility continues in Peter's successors for the good and the unity of Christ's people. (CCC 881; Lumen Gentium, 20, 22.)

READ Read Luke 22:31-32.

ASK 4. How do Peter's weakness and Peter's responsibility appear in the same sentence? What mistake would we make if we equated an office with personal perfection?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Jesus tells Peter that Satan will sift the disciples, that he has prayed for Peter's faith, and that Peter, "when you have turned again," is to strengthen his brothers. A failure is predicted and a task is assigned in one breath. A commission from Christ does not make its holder sinless. Catholic teaching on papal authority and infallibility is not a claim that every papal action, opinion, or decision is free from error. Infallibility is narrow and conditioned. (CCC 891; Lumen Gentium, 25.)

READ Read Matthew 16:21-23.

SAY This is the same chapter, a few verses later.

ASK 5. What happens to the man who was just given the keys? What does that tell us about the office and the man?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Jesus calls Peter "Satan" and a hindrance, because Peter is thinking like a man and not like God. The keys were given five verses earlier. The office survives the correction of the man who holds it. That is the pattern the whole New Testament shows for Peter, and the pattern Catholics expect of popes.

A Serious Objection | build it, then press it

SAY Now the objection at full strength. This one is serious, and thoughtful Christians make it.

THE OBJECTION | read aloud

"Grant that Peter had a special role. Nothing in Matthew says that role becomes a permanent office in Rome. Matthew never mentions Rome, never mentions successors, and never explains any process of succession. You are reading a papacy back into one conversation on a mountainside."

"Christians also do not agree about the rock. Many say it is Peter's confession, or Christ himself. And even on your reading, Matthew 18:18 gives the same binding and loosing to all the disciples. So whatever Peter got, the others got too. Where is the office?"

ASK What does Matthew establish on its own? What has to come from somewhere else, and where? And does Matthew 18 cancel Matthew 16?

LEADER Let the group try to answer from the passages read tonight before you share the response. Do not rescue the discussion too early.

CATHOLIC RESPONSE | share after the discussion

Matthew is not an administrative handbook, and the objection is right that Rome and succession are not in the text. Matthew gives Peter a personal commission inside the Church Christ builds. The Catholic conclusion about the bishops of Rome rests on that commission read together with the Church's apostolic Tradition and her definitive teaching. Irenaeus, around the year 180, is an early witness to Rome's succession from Peter and Paul. The Church states the enduring office in Lumen Gentium 20 and 22 and CCC 880-882. The argument is cumulative, and we do not claim Rome is in Matthew 16.

On the rock, verse 19 does not wait for that debate. "I will give you the keys" is singular and personal. On Matthew 18, the Church says the same thing the text does: binding and loosing was given to Peter and also to the college of Apostles united with him (CCC 1444). Peter alone receives the keys, and the college shares the power with him and never apart from him. That is Catholic teaching in one sentence. (CCC 880-882; 1444.)

Send | Respond personally

ASK 1. How does seeing the pope as a steward under Christ change the way you pray for him?

ASK 2. How could you explain Peter's office to a friend without making either the pope or your own opinion the center of the faith?

Live It This Week

Pray. Pray daily this week for the pope, your bishop, and the unity of all Christians.

Read. Read Lumen Gentium 22 slowly. Note what it says about the pope and what it says about the other bishops in the same paragraph.

Practice. Explain, using John 21, the difference between Christ's authority and authority exercised in his name.

Scripture Memory

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

Luke 22:32 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

SAY Lord Jesus, the Church belongs to you. Purify those who lead her and those who follow. Keep us faithful to your teaching and generous toward everyone you call into your flock. Amen.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in the order it appears. Materials: RSV2CE Bibles for everyone, this guide, and the Take-Home sheets to hand out at the end.

When	Passage	Purpose
1	Matthew 16:13-19	Confession, rock, and keys
2	Isaiah 22:19-23	Live discovery: the steward's key
3	John 21:15-17	Christ's sheep entrusted to Peter
4	Luke 22:31-32	Weakness and responsibility together
5	Matthew 16:21-23	The office survives the correction of the man
Memory	Luke 22:32	Strengthening the brethren

Dig Deeper | Acts 15:6-12 and Galatians 2:11-14

Peter speaks first at the council and the assembly falls silent. Paul later corrects Peter to his face at Antioch over conduct, not doctrine. Read the two together with CCC 891. A real primacy and a fallible man are both in the New Testament, and the Church has never pretended otherwise.

After the meeting

Hand out Take-Home 3. Do not distribute this answer-bearing leader guide as a participant workbook.