

## **WHO IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH?**

ALTHOUGH there is the proposal for Church unity, it is common knowledge that the question as to who is the head of the Church is one of the issues on which there still exists an area of disagreement. The right answer to this question is of paramount importance because it touches on the very foundation of the divine institution that is known as Church.

The issue of doctrines is very important in the Christian Faith. St. Paul warned Timothy, a bishop in the early Church, to guard the doctrines of God jealously and charged him to warn others to "TEACH NO OTHER DOCTRINE". – 1 Timothy 1: 3; 4: 16; see also Galatians 1: 8, 9, A. V.

It is an article of faith of the Roman Catholic Church that Peter the apostle was the 'rock' upon which Jesus Christ built his Church and that Peter was chosen to be the "Head of the Church" and the "Chief of the Apostles". Linked with this is the claim that every Pope or Bishop of Rome is a successor of St. Peter.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Baltimore, James Cardinal Gibbons, stated: "The Catholic Church teaches also that our Lord conferred on St. Peter the first place of honor and jurisdiction in the government of His whole Church, and that the same spiritual supremacy has always resided in the Popes, or Bishops of Rome, as being the successors of St. Peter." (The Faith Of Our Fathers, Eighty-third Revised Edition, page 78.)

A Catholic Dictionary, Second Edition, Revised, defines the "Church of Christ" as "the visible religious society... instituted directly by Christ. under one head, St. Peter and his successors, the popes.. ." (Page 97).

A Roman Catholic magazine – the Catholic Voice, issue of June 1956 – had this to say: "...Our Divine Lord called Peter the 'rock' on which His Church would be built ..." (page 81). And answering a question as to why our Lord appeared to St. Peter, the Catholic Voice of July 1956, stated: "...We presume that He did so because He had chosen Peter to be the Head of His Apostles and the Church." (Page 102)

The issues involved in this matter are very serious and are of tremendous spiritual interest to both Roman Catholics and Protestants alike as well as any other person who desires to acquire an accurate knowledge of the Christian Faith. It is the more interesting that the Roman Catholic Church bases its teaching about the primacy of Peter not merely on 'tradition' but on the Scripture.

### **Holy Bible**

We must admit that the awakening of the interest of the Catholics in the Holy Bible is a significant development in Christendom. Under the heading, "BACK TO THE BIBLE", a Catholic newspaper, the INDEPENDENT of October 16-22, 1966, published: "One effect of the Ecumenical Council has been to re-awaken our interest in the Bible...Not only must Priests find in the Bible the source of their sacred learning, nourishment for their interior life and substance for the instruction of their people, but the people, too, should be encouraged and helped to read the sacred scriptures for themselves." In Course No. 6 of the "Catholic Enquiry Centre", published at Owerri, Nigeria, it is positively stated: "And for a Catholic the whole Bible is the word of God...It is a Catholic teaching that there is no error in the Bible." We of the God's Kingdom Society always endeavour to keep an open mind towards one and all. It is our policy to call a spade a spade, or truth, truth, no matter who says it because we firmly believe that the truth belongs to God. Therefore, if the Roman Catholics are right we must sincerely admit that they are right, but if they are wrong, yes, we should not only say so

but we should also prove from the Holy Bible, which they believe is “the word of God”, that they are wrong.

Indeed, we quite agree with Rev. John Laux, M. A., author of *A Course in Religion for Catholic High Schools and Academies* (Part III) when he stated that we should enlarge our knowledge, cultivate our reason, “to get an insight in- to the relation of truth to truth; to learn to view things as they are”.

Now let us turn to the Holy Bible to get an insight into the relation of scripture to scripture about the truth of the question, “Who is the Head of the Church?” In order to avoid misgivings and for the benefit of our Catholic friends, all Bible references in this sermon, except otherwise expressly stated, are from the Douay Version which some call ‘Roman Catholic Bible’.

### **This Rock**

When Jesus Christ came to the coasts of Cesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples: “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” Some people, the disciples told him, said John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus then asked: “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:13-16) Following this reply, Jesus said: “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.”- Matthew 16: 17, 18.

What has been described as the “charter of the Papacy” is drawn from this declaration of Christ. Thus in answer to Question 88, *The Explanatory Catechism* states: “I know that Christ appointed St. Peter to be the Head of the Church, because Christ said to him: ‘Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church...’ (Matt. xvi. 18, 19.)”

At this juncture, we must say outright that the interpretation given the text by the Roman Catholic Church has given cause for dispute among Christians because some believe that Jesus Christ NEVER made Peter the head of the Church. No one, apart from Jesus Christ himself or God’s word in the Bible, is competent to settle this dispute. Jesus Christ, it is clear in the Bible, did not say St. Peter is the rock; neither did he say that the church was built upon him nor that he was the head of the Church. Rather Jesus Christ himself is the rock upon which the Church is built, and he is the head of the Church. The truth of this in the Bible is so clear that there is no room for doubt for anyone who keeps his mind free from prejudice.

When Jesus said, “Thou art Peter”, we know as a rule in grammar that Peter was the second person. And when Christ added, “and upon THIS rock”, we can as well understand that he was no longer referring to the second person – Peter. If Peter were the rock, Christ would have said, “Thou art Peter, and upon thee, the rock, I will build my church”. The contrast between “THOU” and “THIS” should not be confused. So when he said, “and upon THIS rock”, Christ was pointing to him- self, the Son of the Living God, as the one upon whom the Church would be built.

In fact, he is the rock or foundation stone. This fact is strengthened by St. Paul’s statement concerning the natural Jews, to wit: “And all drank the same spiritual drink; (And they drank of the spiritual rock that followed them; and THE ROCK WAS CHRIST.)” – 1 Corinthians 10: 4.

### **The Foundation**

The “Catholic Truth Society” of London stated in a pamphlet, *What Do You Know about St. Peter and His Successors...*: “One such essential feature of the Church was undoubtedly the

authority of St. Peter. It was the foundation, and what could be more essential to any building than the foundation? If the foundation changes, the building changes. Our Lord actually compared His Church to a building erected on the foundation of St. Peter's authority."

We agree that Jesus Christ likened the Church to a building but there is no passage in the whole Bible which states that St. Peter is the foundation of the Church.

Long before the human existence of Jesus Christ it had been foretold that he would be a stone to be laid by God in Zion for a foundation—a stone, though rejected by human builders, that would still become the head-stone. (Psalm 117: 22,23; Isaiah 28: 16) Referring to Jesus Christ, St. Peter said to the Jews: "This is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, which is become the head of the corner..." — Acts 4: 10- 12; 1 Peter 2: 6.

The name Peter, from the Greek word Petros means a stone. It was Christ himself who called Simon, his apostle, Peter (John 1: 42) which spiritually signifies strong faith in God. Other faithful servants of Christ are also stones. That was why St. Peter wrote to the Christians: "Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." And turning to the prophecy relating to Christ, he added : "Wherefore it is said in the Scripture: Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner-stone, elect, precious..." — 1 Peter 2: 3-8.

All the apostles make up the "Little Flock" but there are the "other sheep" whom Christ promised to gather. (Luke 12: 32; John 10: 16) Both the apostles, including Peter, who are the foundation members in the sense of being the predestinated and first fruits of Christ's disciples, and the "other sheep" are all built on ONE foundation, which is Christ. Said St. Paul: "Now therefore you are no more strangers and foreigners; but you are fellow citizens with the saints and the domestics of God, built upon the foundation of the APOSTLES and PROPHETS (note — NOT Peter alone, but all the apostles). Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone, in whom (Christ, not Peter) all the building, being framed together, groweth up into an holy temple in the Lord. In whom (Christ) you also are built together into an habitation of God in the Spirit." — Ephesians 2: 19-22.

Whatever remains in the argument of the Catholics, if any at all, is knocked out by St. Paul when he stated: "For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid: WHICH IS CHRIST JESUS." — 1 Corinthians 3:11.

Saint Peter was at no time given supreme power over the other apostles. If by Christ's saying "Thou art Peter" and so forth, he was understood by the apostles to have made Peter their head, why was it that after that occasion they still "disputed among themselves, which of them should be the greatest"? Even then Jesus did not say Peter was greater than anyone of them but he said, "For he that is the lesser among you all he is the greater." — Mark 9: 33, 34; Luke 9: 46-48.

St. Paul whose wisdom was commended by St. Peter, laboured more than all the apostles (1 Corinthians 15: 10) and he did not consider himself inferior to Peter or any other apostle. He said: "For in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing." — 2 Corinthians 12: 11; 11: 5, King James or Authorised Version (A. V.).

St. Peter recognised that he was an elder or an overseer just as other apostles were. He wrote: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who AM ALSO AN ELDER, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof..." (1 Peter 5: 1-3, A.V.) He did not say he was the only elder or head of the apostles.

That Christ Jesus is the head of the Church and not St. Peter, there is no doubt. Concerning Christ it is written: "...And He (God Almighty) hath subjected all things under his (Christ's) feet and hath made him (Christ) head over all the Church..." — Ephesians 1: 19-23.

Exhorting the Christians in regard to the duties of husband and wife, Saint Paul used the relationship between Christ and the Church as an example, and showed that Jesus Christ, not Peter, is the head of the Church. Said he: "Let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord; because the husband is the head of the wife, AS CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH. He is the saviour of his body. Therefore, as the church is subject to Christ (not Peter, we reiterate) so also let the wives be to their husbands in all things." – Ephesians 5: 22-24.

What is more, Saint Paul described Jesus Christ as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature". He added: "And he (Christ) is the HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH; who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he (Christ) may hold the primacy; because in him, it hath well pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell..." – Colossians 1: 15-20.

The truth of the matter is already made bare. Some may ignore it or argue it – it remains the truth, God's word of truth says that God "hath made him (Christ, NOT Peter) Head over all the Church". All we can do, if we are true to our conscience, is to accept the truth for our own good in the Lord. "For we can do nothing against the truth; but for the truth." (2 Corinthians 13: 8) And Jesus said, "You shall know the truth; and the truth shall make you free."