

In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter receives the keys to the kingdom. Jesus explains: “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19). Peter is given the role as an authoritative teacher. With the power to loose and to bind comes the ability to lift or to impose excommunication. The keys to the kingdom of heaven also give Peter the sacred responsibility of exercising authority over the church on earth.

The image of the keys as a symbol of authority is first seen in the Old Testament when the Prophet Isaiah tells us about Eliakim and his newfound power:

I will clothe him with your robe, gird him with your sash, confer on him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; what he opens, no one will shut, what he shuts, no one will open. (Is 22:21-22)

Eliakim proved to be a disappointment, so an oracle of judgment was added to the originally positive oracle (Note to Isaiah 22).

Likewise, just a few verses after receiving authority from Jesus, Peter proves to be a disappointment. Jesus offers the first prediction of his passion; he knows he will suffer and die and be raised on the third day. Peter can't imagine how anything like that is possible and pulls Jesus to the side so that he will not speak that way again. Peter must have been very surprised when his effort to help Jesus meets with a very sharp rebuke.

“Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do” (Mt 16:23) “Peter’s refusal to accept Jesus’ predicted suffering and death is seen as a satanic attempt to deflect Jesus from his God-appointed course, and the disciple is addressed in terms that recall Jesus’ dismissal of the devil in the temptation account (Mt 4:10: “Get away, Satan!”) (Footnote to Mt 16:22-23).

After the Resurrection, Peter will have a much deeper understanding of why Jesus needed to suffer and die for our salvation. Jesus appears to Peter and asks him “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” This episode (John 20:15-23) establishes Peter’s rehabilitation and reemphasizes his role of authority in the church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains in further detail:

Jesus entrusted a specific authority to Peter: ... The “power of the keys” designates authority to govern the house of God, which is the Church... The power to “bind and loose” connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church (CCC 552)

Jesus entrusted this authority to the Church through the ministry of the apostles and in particular through the ministry of Peter and his successors.

After the resurrection, Jesus also appeared to the Apostles in the upper room. This too is about the authority to absolve sins. Jesus “breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20:22-23).

We know all too well, that Peter and subsequent popes have been all too human, men at times saintly and at other times men of sin. Does this not describe the human condition? Are we not all sinners in need of redemption? Are we not all beloved children of God called to holiness?

When we fail in our call to holiness, let us be especially thankful to Jesus for entrusting the keys to the kingdom to Peter and for offering us the sacrament of reconciliation for the forgiveness of sins. When we confess our sins to a priest, Jesus is present asking us through the priest, “Do you love me?” Like Peter, we have the opportunity to profess our faith. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” And like Peter, we too are given another chance, set free from our sins and rehabilitated to love God as he has first loved us.