

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1Cor 1:10)

✠ Lecture IV: The Alleged Primacy of St. Peter ✠

The Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of the term ‘Catholic’ is the acknowledgment of the primacy of the bishop of Rome. They believe that the Roman Church is **the** ‘Catholic’ Church and all local Churches (Coptic, Russian, Greek, etc.) should be part of this one Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the name ‘Roman Catholic’ is self-contradictory, for how could it be ‘Catholic’ (Universal) and ‘Roman’ at the same time? They try to support their views by claiming that St. Peter was ‘the prince of the apostles’ and that the bishop of Rome, as the bearer of the Petrine office, is raised to a position of lonely eminence as chief bishop or primate of the Universal Church.

In what follows we shall, by the grace of God, refute these claims by demonstrating that:

1. All the disciples were equal.
2. St. Paul is the founder of the Church of Rome and not St. Peter.

✠ Refutation of the Primacy of St. Peter:

→ On the way to Capernaum, the disciples discussed who would be the greatest among themselves (Mk 9:34), so our Lord sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9:35). When the mother of Zebedee’s sons (St. James & St. John) asked the Lord that they might sit one on His right and the other on His left in His Kingdom (Mt 20:21), our Lord said to the disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet **it shall not be so among you**, but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave” (Mt 20:25-26). Obviously our Lord did not assign St. Peter (or any other disciple) the leadership of the twelve, on the contrary He explicitly said, “It shall not be so among you”.

→ It is written in the Holy Book of Acts that “when the apostles who were in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, **they sent Peter** and John to them” (Acts 8:14). Now if St. Peter were the ‘Prince of the Apostles’, as the Roman Church claims, it would have been inappropriate for the apostles to send their prince on a mission. One would expect ‘the prince’ to be sending people not to be sent by them!

→ When the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter of keeping Moses’ Law by the Gentiles (Acts 15:6), St. James presided over the assembly and gave the final decision on the matter while St. Peter was among the regular speakers (Acts 15:13).

→ St. Paul said, “Now when **Peter** had come to Antioch, **I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed**; for before certain men came from James, he (St. Peter) would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision And the rest of the Jews also **played the hypocrite with him** (St. Peter), so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, **I said to Peter before them all**, ‘if you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?’” (Gal 2:11-14) Clearly, the way St. Paul is speaking in the above passage refutes any claims of primacy and leadership to St. Peter. How could St. Paul “withstand him to his face”, “blame him”, call him a “hypocrite”, say that “he was not straightforward about the truth of the gospel”, and do this “before them all” if indeed St. Peter were the ‘prince of the apostles’?

‡ Misinterpreted Passages:

1) It is written, “Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: **first**, Simon, who is called Peter” (Mt 10:2):

→ Mentioning the name of St. Peter in the beginning does not give him any advantage over the rest of the apostles for St. Paul said, “when James, Cephas (St. Peter) and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship” (Gal 2:9) here St. James was mentioned before St. Peter and the order of the names did not mean that he (St. James) was the leader or the prince of the apostles. Moreover, we always mention the Father before the Son and the Holy Spirit and we believe that the three Hypostasis are equal.

2) Our Lord said, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19):

→ **Rock** does not refer to the person of St. Peter but to his confession of the faith. The true rock and foundation upon which the church is established is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself about whom it was said, “Behold I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and **rock** of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Is 8:14; Rom 9:33; 1Pet 2:6). St. Peter himself said about the Lord, “This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief corner stone” (Acts 4:11), Isaiah the Prophet said about the Lord that He is “a precious corner stone, **a sure foundation**” (Is 28:16) indeed “that Rock was Christ” (1Cor 10:4). St. Paul said that the Church is built “on the foundation of the apostles (not St. Peter alone) and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20), “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, **which is Jesus Christ.**” (1Cor 3:11) All the apostles were given the same authority to loose and bind sins in (Mt 18:18).

→ Ironically, in the same chapter that is used by the Roman Church to promote St. Peter’s primacy, our Lord said to him, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” (Mt 16:23)

3) After the Resurrection of the Lord, the angel said to the women, “Go tell His disciples – and Peter – that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him” (Mk 16:7):

→ This verse does not prove any primacy, on the contrary, the angel separated St. Peter from the rest of the disciples because he had denied the Lord and was not worthy to be counted among them. Notice that he was called with just his name without any title.

4) Our Lord said to St. Peter, “Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep” (Jn 21:15-16):

→ The Lord asked St. Peter three times “do you love Me?” to remind him of the three times he denied knowing Him, and He said to him “tend My sheep and feed My lambs” in order to restore his apostleship that he lost with his denial. St. Peter himself did not consider this as a special commission and the Holy Bible said, “**Peter was grieved** because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’” (Jn 21:17) It was said to the bishops, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, **to shepherd** the Church of God” (Acts 20:28) and “**Shepherd the flock** of God which is among you, serving as overseers” (1Pet 2:5); this is the general commission to the bishops and apostles to tend to the sheep.

✠ **St. Paul is the founder of the Roman Church:**

1. St. Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles (uncircumcised), while St. Peter is the apostle of the Jews (circumcised):

- St. Paul said, “The gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter for He worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles” (**Gal 2:7-8**)
- The Lord said to St. Paul, “Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles” (**Acts 22:21**)
- The Lord also said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome” (**Acts 23:11**)

It is clear that Rome, as the capital of the Gentile world, falls in the jurisdiction of St. Paul who is the apostle to the Gentiles and even though St. Peter had baptized Cornelius (**Acts 10**), The Holy Epistle to the Galatians (written after Cornelius’ conversion) still considered him the apostle to the Jews (**Gal 2:7-8**)

2. The Holy Book of Acts testifies that St. Paul met with the leaders of the Jews in Rome three days after his arrival to the city (**Acts 28:16-17**) and **they did not know anything about Christianity**, they said to St. Paul, “we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere” (**Acts 28:22**). On an appointed day, they all gathered at St. Paul’s house who started to persuade them concerning our Lord from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening (**Acts 28:23**) and “some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved” (**Acts 28:24**). St. Paul said to them, “Let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it” (**Acts 28:28**). It is written that St. Paul stayed for two whole years in Rome preaching the Kingdom and teaching the things, which concern our Lord with all confidence, no one forbidding him (**Acts 28:30-31**).

3. St. Paul said to the Romans, “I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation” (**Rom 15:20**). From the above account of the Holy Book of Acts and these words, it is clear that St. Peter was not in Rome before the arrival of St. Paul. This is also evident by the fact that St. Paul greeted 20 persons in the Holy Epistle to the Romans and St. Peter was not among them. Moreover, he wrote five Holy Epistles from Rome and never mentioned the name of St. Peter as being present there.

4. How could St. Luke who even documented that St. Paul shaved his head (**Acts 18:18**) neglect the work of St. Peter in Rome, the capital of the empire, if it indeed took place? There is not a single verse in the Holy Bible that implies that St. Peter preached in Rome but we know from Holy Tradition that he was martyred in Rome around the year 67 AD, and by that time St. Paul had already established the Church of Rome. Therefore, the Pope of Rome is actually the successor of St. Paul and not St. Peter.

✠ **A Final Word:**

The Copts love St. Peter and ask for his prayers, celebrate his martyrdom every year, and call their children by his name. Yet refuse to be deceived by false teachings about this great saint, St. Paul rebuked the Corinthians because there were contentions among them for one said, “I am of Paul” another “I am of Apollos” a third “I am of Cephas” (**1Cor 1:12**) He said to them, “you are still carnal. For there are envy, strife, and divisions among you” (**1Cor 3:3**). “Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas (St. Peter), or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” (**1Cor 3:21-23**)

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*St Mark*’ by H..H. Pope Shenouda III and ‘*The Orthodox Rock*’ by Archdeacon Habib Guergis.