

Commentary Chapter 36

The duration of the Church. "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The Church, therefore, can neither be overcome nor destroyed; it will endure till the end of time.

Peter is the visible head of the Church and the Vicar of Christ upon earth. Our Lord built His Church upon the rock of Peter (on the rock which is Peter), giving to it an invincible strength and stability. Thus Peter, according to the will of the Divine Architect, is the immovable foundation of the Church. On him the visible Church, and all its pillars and stones (or to speak without figure, all its members) must, mediately or immediately, rest, and by this support be kept together. Whatever does not rest on this foundation, does not belong to the Church of Christ. We must, therefore, accept the fact that Peter occupies quite a unique position in the Church; that he is its supreme head, and that his office is to keep all other members in the unity of the faith, and that he is, in fact, the supreme authority in the Church. This is to be understood by the power of the keys, which was given to Peter. The giving up to another of the keys of a house is understood by all to be the token of the surrender to that person of supreme authority over the house and its inhabitants. So, when our Lord Jesus gave to St. Peter the power of the keys, He gave him supreme authority over His Church, that is, the authority to teach, to judge, and to make laws. The promise which our Lord on this occasion made to Peter, He fulfilled after His resurrection, when He gave him the office of Chief Pastor. By this supreme authority Peter became the visible representative of our Lord Jesus Christ upon earth, and this Primacy of St. Peter must needs continue so long as the Church lasts; in other words, there must be successors of Peter.

The Pope. St. Peter became the first Bishop of Rome, and for that reason the Roman Bishop has ever been the successor of St. Peter in the Primacy. Hence he is called the 'Pope', i. e. the father of all the faithful. The Papacy therefore is of divine institution.

The Infallibility of the Pope. The infernal spirit of lies would overcome the Church, if he could succeed in diverting her from the true faith, and plunging her into error. If, therefore, the Church is to be invincible through Peter (that is, through the Papacy), the Pope must be an infallible teacher. Even as far back as the third century St. Cyprian writes: "To the rock of Peter no error can obtain access." The pope is infallible when he speaks "Ex Cathedra" which means from the chair. When the pope speaks from the chair of Peter, meaning when he exercises his authority as Peter's successor, on a matter of faith or morals, upon the whole church, intending to bind them, then he is protected from errors. Outside of these conditions he is still a man and like other men may be wrong.