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Why is the Pope Peter?

For the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter on 22 February, we can reflect on why we see the Pope as our Lord Jesus Christ's representative here on earth.

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Some people today ask, “Why should we obey the Pope? He’s just a human being, isn’t he?” “Does being infallible mean that the Pope can’t make a mistake?”

Summary

1. If Christ is the Head of the Church, why do we also call St Peter the Head of the Church?

2. Why is the Pope the successor of St Peter?

3. What is the Pope's mission?

4. What do we mean when we say that the Pope is the "Vicar of Christ" or "Supreme Pontiff"?

5. Does "infallible" mean the Pope can never be wrong?

6. When is the infallibility of the Magisterium exercised?

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1. If Christ is the Head of the Church, why do we also call St. Peter the head of the Church?

In several places in the Gospels it is clear that Christ set St. Peter at the

head of the Church. “When Christ instituted the Twelve, ‘he constituted them in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from among them’ (Lumen Gentium 19).” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 880)

“The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the ‘rock’ of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church (see Matthew 16: 18-19), and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock (see John 21: 15-17). ‘The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head’ (Lumen Gentium 22). This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church’s very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 881)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Your deepest love, your greatest esteem, your most heartfelt veneration, your most complete obedience and your warmest affection have also to be shown towards the Vicar of Christ on earth, towards the Pope. We Catholics should consider that after God and the most Blessed Virgin, our Mother, the Holy Father comes next in the hierarchy of love and authority. (*Forge*, 135)
- This is the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care, commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it, and which he raised up for all ages as the pillar and mainstay of the truth. (*In Love*

With The Church, “Loyalty to the Church”, no. 2)

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2. Why is the Pope the successor of St Peter?

The Pope is the legitimate successor of St Peter because Christ appointed St Peter head of his Church. St Peter, by God's Will, came to live in Rome. And so, by divine disposition, whoever succeeds him as Bishop of Rome also succeeds him in the supreme government of the Church. (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 882)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a delightful passion, for in him we see Christ. If we deal with the Lord in prayer, we will go forward

with a clear gaze that will permit us to perceive the action of the Holy Spirit, even in the face of events we do not understand or which produce sighs or sorrow. (*In Love With The Church*, “Loyalty to the Church”, no. 13)

- Catholic, apostolic, Roman! I want you to be very Roman. And to be anxious to make your ‘path to Rome’, *videre Petrum* – to see Peter. (*The Way*, 520)
- I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of martyrs, the centre from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ. To be Roman does not entail any manifestation of provincialism, but rather of authentic ecumenism. It presupposes a desire to enlarge one’s heart, to open it to all men and women

with the redemptive zeal of Christ, who seeks all and takes in all, for he has loved all first. (*In Love With The Church*, “Loyalty to the Church”, no. 11)

3. What is the Pope’s mission?

“The Pope, bishop of Rome and the successor of Saint Peter, is the perpetual, visible source and foundation of the unity of the Church. He is the vicar of Christ, the head of the college of bishops and pastor of the universal Church over which he has by divine institution full, supreme, immediate, and universal power.” (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 182)

The Pope, “by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church, a power which he can

always exercise unhindered.”
(Catechism of the Catholic Church,
no. 882)

Meditate with Pope Benedict XVI

- “This is Peter's ongoing mission: to ensure that the Church is never identified with a single nation, with a single culture or with a single State but is always the Church of all; to ensure that she reunites humanity over and above every boundary and, in the midst of the divisions of this world, makes God's peace present, the reconciling power of his love. Thanks to technology that is the same everywhere, thanks to the world information network and also thanks to the connection of common interests, in the world today new forms of unity exist; yet they spark new disputes and give a new impetus to the old

ones. In the midst of this external unity, based on material things, our need for the inner unity which comes from God's peace is all the greater - the unity of all those who have become brothers and sisters through Jesus Christ. This is Peter's permanent mission and also the specific task entrusted to the Church of Rome.” (Benedict XVI, Homily, 29 June 2008)

- “St Peter’s journey to Rome, as representative of the world’s peoples, comes especially under the word ‘one’: his task was to create the unity of the *catholica*, the Church formed by Jews and pagans, the Church of all the peoples.” (Benedict XVI, Homily, 29 June 2008)
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4. What do we mean when we say that the Pope is the "Vicar of Christ" or "Supreme Pontiff"?

The Pope is called the Vicar of Christ because he stands for him in the governance of the church. The word "Vicar" comes from the Latin *vices agere*, stand in for. He is the visible head of the Church because he governs the Church with the authority of Christ himself, who is the invisible Head of the Church. (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 882)

Supreme Pontiff means high priest, because the Pope has all the spiritual powers with which Christ enriched his Church. The Supreme Pontiff, Bishop of Rome and successor of St Peter, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen Gentium* 23).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- The Catholic Church is Roman. I savour that word, Roman! I feel completely Roman, since Roman means universal, Catholic. For it leads me to a tender love for the Pope, “the sweet Christ on earth”, as Saint Catherine of Siena, whom I count as a most beloved friend, liked to repeat. (*In Love With The Church*, “Loyalty to the Church”, no. 11)
- For all those moments in history which the devil makes it his business to repeat, I thought that what you wrote to me on loyalty was very appropriate: “I carry with me every day in my heart, in my mind and on my lips, one aspiration: Rome.” (*Furrow*, 344)
- Our Holy Mother the Church, in a magnificent extension of love, is scattering the seed of the

Gospel throughout the world; from Rome to the outposts of the earth. As you help in this work of expansion throughout the whole world, bring those in the outposts to the Pope, so that the earth may be one flock and one Shepherd: one apostolate! (*The Forge*, 638)

5. Does “infallible” mean the Pope can never be wrong?

In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ (...) endowed the Church's shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 889-890)

The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office,

when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful – who confirms his brethren in the faith – he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 891)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- The supreme power of the Roman Pontiff and his infallibility, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, are not human inventions. They are based on the explicit foundational will of Christ. How foolish it is, then, to confront the government of the Pope with that of the bishops, or to reduce the validity of the pontifical Magisterium to the consent of the faithful! Nothing is more foreign to it than a balance of powers; human moulds of thought do not help us, no matter how attractive or

functional they may be. No one in the Church enjoys absolute power by himself, as man. In the Church there is no leader other than Christ. And Christ constituted a vicar of his — the Roman Pontiff — for his wayfaring spouse on earth. (*In Love With The Church*, “Loyalty to the Church”, no. 13)

6. When is the infallibility of the Magisterium exercised?

Infallibility is exercised when the Roman Pontiff, in virtue of his office as the Supreme Pastor of the Church, or the college of bishops, in union with the Pope especially when joined together in an Ecumenical Council, proclaim by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. Infallibility is also exercised

when the Pope and bishops in their ordinary Magisterium are in agreement in proposing a doctrine as definitive. Every one of the faithful must adhere to such teaching with the obedience of faith. (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 185)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Every day you must grow in loyalty towards the Church, the Pope and the Holy See... with a love that should be always more theological. (Furrow, 353)
- Faithfulness to the Pope includes a clear and definite duty: that of knowing his thought, which he tells us in Encyclicals or other documents. We have to do our part to help all Catholics pay attention to the teaching of the Holy Father, and bring their everyday behaviour into line with it. (The Forge, 633)

- Welcome the Pope's words with a religious, humble, internal and effective acceptance. And pass them on! (*The Forge*, 133)

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