

## Church Hierarchy: Teaching Authority

### The Divine Source of Authority

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus establishes Peter as the first Pope: “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and **upon this rock I will build my church**, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” Jesus continues speaking to Peter and his Apostles in Matthew 16:19, giving them a very special responsibility: “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.”

“Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” -- what could that mean? In this verse, Jesus gives Peter and his Apostles the authority to teach and govern his Church, guiding the world to union with God in heaven. The Apostles made many key decisions that helped to set up the systems and organization that keep the Church running in everyday matters. They also established laws that help and encourage members of the Church to live holier lives. The members of the early church acknowledged the special authority Jesus gave the Apostles. They were bound to accept the decisions and laws made by the Apostles because they knew that the decisions and laws would help them achieve a holy life in the face of worldly temptations.

### The Roles Within the Hierarchy

The Apostles were the first **bishops**. Just like they did back then, today bishops have the power to teach Jesus’ message, govern the Christians as Jesus desires, and to administer the Sacraments that Christ established. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus told the Apostles to “make disciples of all nations,” so they spread out around the world to get to work. Each bishop was in charge of Christians in a certain part of the world, but the Church grew so quickly that the Apostles needed more than twelve bishops to guide her. Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the Apostles passed on their powers to preach, teach, and govern to other men. Through the thousands of years of Church history, these powers have been passed down to today’s bishops. Today, the bishop is in charge of a large group of Catholics called a **diocese**, where he uses his God-given authority to rule, teach, and sanctify.

There are so many Christians in the world that the bishops have **priests** to help them with the spiritual needs of the members of the Church. Bishops and priests can both celebrate the Eucharist (Mass) and some of the other Sacraments. Priests help the bishops to govern by governing smaller groups of Catholics called **parishes**. The priest also has the God-given authority to teach and preach at Mass.

**Deacons** work to help the priests in the parish. The priest and the deacon are both ordained by the bishop, but the deacon cannot celebrate the Eucharist (Mass) or forgive sins in the Sacrament of Confession. The deacon can administer the Sacrament of Baptism and act as a witness in the Sacrament of Matrimony. The deacon also has the power to proclaim the Gospel, preach at Mass in the homily, and distribute Holy Communion. The deacon can lead funeral services and helps the priest by visiting the sick and helping the parish out in any other way possible.

Saint Peter was the first Bishop of Rome. The Bishop of Rome is also known as the **Pope**. Just as a priest has a parish and a bishop has a diocese, the Pope governs and teaches the worldwide Church. The Pope, with the help of the bishops, makes laws to govern the entire Church. Inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Pope can also give a solemn, official teaching to the Church about faith and morals. Whenever a Pope passes away, a special group of Church leaders called **cardinals** gather together to elect a new Pope.