Human Representatives of Divine Authority

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Delegation of authority becomes necessary as any society develops in size and complexity. The great King David established Jerusalem, newly captured from the Jebusites, as the capital of the confederation uniting the twelve tribes of Israel. There he built a palace worthy of a monarch to house his family. By bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem he constituted it as a holy city. His son Solomon built the Temple as house for the God of Israel, the Ark being his throne or footstool.

As Jerusalem grew in importance the king appointed officials to supervise many matters of government, giving them titles and symbols of authority. Would these men always remember that they were servants of the king and of God? Isaiah described the deposition of a "master of the palace" named Shebna; he was replaced by someone called Eliakim. Dressed in robes formerly worn by Shebna, Eliakim held the key to the palace and thus controlled access to it. As symbol of authority, this key would be passed on to his successors. So it would be with Peter, because the role of representative of Jesus would perdure over centuries.

After Jesus had formed those followers closest to him into a community, he selected twelve to represent the tribes of Israel and to co-operate in his teaching and healing mission. As Immanuel (see Mt 1:23; 18:20; 28:20) Jesus would always be with the community he founded, but after his return to the Father they would have a visible representative to preserve them in unity of faith and love.

In the biblical culture each person was named with care; the meaning of the name reflected the vocation or character of the individual. If one in authority changed a subject's name, people understood that this implied a change in that person's vocation and destiny. After commending Simon for his faith, Jesus gave him the name Kepha (Aramaic for "rock") which was rendered into Greek as Petros. The firmness of a rock would express the ideal of Simon's response to God the Father in faith and faithfulness.

A divine gift of faith, rather than any human qualities or reasoning, constitutes the basis for Peter's new role and destiny. He proclaimed adherence to Jesus as the Anointed of God (see Mk 8:29), with the mature insight of the Church that the long promised Messiah is moreover "the Son of the living God." This act of faith is centered on Jesus as risen Lord, an essential element in the authentic Christian vision of the divine plan for humanity and creation.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel there is a great emphasis on God's people as a community grounded on faith. The Greek term ekklesia (translated into English by "church") used in Mt 16:18 and 18:17 renders the Hebrew qahal, which means "convocation," a community called together by God's Word in order to worship and serve. Just as the Tabernacle and Temple were
built according to the heavenly model (see Ex 25:40; 26:30), so this community must reflect the holiness of the heavenly Temple. Indeed, this call into the holy assembly completes the vocation and dignity of every human being, created according to the divine model (see Gn 1:26-28).

Flawed creatures in the angelic and human orders have refused to worship and serve their Creator, thus abusing the gifts of intellect and will that should guide them toward their sacred purpose. The victory of Christ over Satan and Hades (the realm of death as alienation from God) assures the Church that God will protect her from defeat by forces of evil. Some members of God's people may be tempted to sever their bond with Peter and his co-workers (see Mt 18:15-20) but this rupture of the unity of faith demanded by Christ becomes a stumbling-block (scandal) for others. By the same token, the burden of responsibility for the Church's leaders is extremely heavy. They need our constant prayers and cooperation. Everything that they do and teach must correspond to the Father's will being fulfilled in the heavenly court. With the phrase "binding and loosing," Jesus teaches that Peter and his successors have a mission with dimensions reaching beyond time and into eternity. It is awe-inspiring indeed that God endows human beings with such gifts! This is but one aspect of God's inscrutable wisdom that St. Paul celebrates in the hymn closing his reflection on the bond between Jews and Christians. We might also pray these words with regard to our own vocation.