

Upon This Rock

Most of us, both Catholics and evangelicals, have read Jesus' declaration in Matthew 16: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'

As a Catholic you may wonder why many evangelical Christians still won't believe that the church is built upon the apostle Peter. They are being obstinate, you may think, for Jesus' words are plain and easy to understand.

But is this verse really that simple? The controversy centres on the exact meaning of 'this rock'? Is it a reference to Peter, as Catholics insist, or to Peter's confession ('You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'), as many evangelicals say?

Those of us who were raised in the Catholic Church had been trained since childhood to understand the rock as a reference to the apostle Peter because his name means 'a rock'.

This interpretation is absolutely necessary, though by no means sufficient, for the Catholic argument for the Papacy. If it cannot be established conclusively that 'this rock' must be the apostle Peter, rather than somebody or something else, then this scripture affords no proof to the claims of supreme and universal jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome.

Consider for a moment the possibility that 'this rock' is a reference to Peter's confession about Jesus rather than the apostle personally. The context is all about the identity of Jesus. 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' The Jews did not perceive the divine glory of their Messiah, mistaking him for one of the prophets, but Peter, speaking for the apostolic group, and inspired by God the Father, made that glorious confession: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. It makes sense that the Church should be built on the foundational truth that Jesus is the Divine Son of God who was sent from heaven for our salvation.

As a Catholic you may be interested to know that this is not a novel or an improbable interpretation. There was no unanimous consent among the Fathers in the early church about its meaning; they expressed a variety of opinions, some equating the rock with Peter while others with his confession or with Christ.

For instance St Augustine wrote: 'For on this very account the Lord said, *On this rock will I build my Church*, because Peter had said, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. *On this rock*, therefore, He said, *which you have confessed, I will build my Church*. For the Rock was Christ; and on this foundation was Peter himself also built. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus' (Augustine, [Tractate 124, 5](#)). So Augustine taught that the rock was Peter's confession, that is, Christ himself.

Even more interesting is the plain admission by the modern Roman Catholic Church that the rock is Peter's confession. 'Moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit and drawn by the Father, we believe in Jesus and confess: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' On the rock of this faith confessed by St Peter, Christ built his Church' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 424).

That is exactly how evangelical Christians understand this verse: *Christ built his Church on the rock of the faith confessed by Peter*, namely, the truth that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. As a Catholic you should at least admit that this interpretation is not incorrect.

As for evangelicals, let us remember that we are built on Peter in the sense that we too embrace the revelation which he confessed. We also firmly believe that Jesus is the Son of God. If we depart from this truth, as some liberal 'Christians' have done, we can no longer claim to be part of the Church founded by the Lord Jesus.