

P.A.R.80
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ARCIC 230/Petrine Texts/1

VENICE 24(a)

The position of Peter among the apostles has often been discussed in relation to the importance of the bishop of Rome among the bishops. This fact makes it incumbent upon us to look at the data of the New Testament and its so-called Petrine Texts. Even though Peter exercised a certain leadership among the apostles, pastoral responsibility was not restricted exclusively to him. The expression "binding and loosing", which is used for the explicit commission to Peter in Mt.16:19, appears again in Mt.18:18 in a wider, though direct, promise to the ministers of the Church. Similarly the apostolic foundation upon which the church is built is related to Peter in Mt 16:18 and to the whole apostolic body elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g. Eph.2:20). Even though Peter was the spokesman at Pentecost, already the charge to proclaim the gospel to all the world had been given by the risen Christ to the Eleven (Acts 1:2-8). Paul also, although he was not among the Twelve, was conspicuous for the leadership which he exercised with an authority received from the Lord himself, claiming to share with Peter and others parallel responsibility and apostolic authority (Gal.2:7, 8: 1 Cor.9:1).

While explicitly stressing Christ's will to root the Church in the apostolic witness and mandate, the New Testament also attributed to Peter a special position among the Twelve. Whether the Petrine texts contain the direct words of Jesus or not, they witness to an early tradition that Peter already held this place during Jesus' ministry. Individually the indications are inconclusive, but taken together they provide a general picture of his prominence. The most important are: the change of the name Simon to Cephas, his being named first among the Twelve and in the smaller circle of the three (Peter, James and John), the confession of Jesus' Messiahship especially in Matthew (16:16, cf. Mark 8:29 and Luke 9:20) and John (6:69), the charge to strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:31,32) and to feed the sheep (John 21:16-18) and the special appearance to him of the risen Lord (e.g. Luke 24:34, I Cor.15:5). Although it may have been the intention of the author to underline the parallel apostolic authority of Paul in the latter part of the Acts, yet the first half of the book focusses on Peter's leadership. For instance, it is Peter who frequently speaks in the name of the apostolic community, he is the first to proclaim the gospel to the Jews and the first to open the Christian community to the Gentiles. Paul seems to have recognized this prominence of Peter among

the apostles (e.g. Gal.1:18) and to have accepted the lead given by Peter at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), even though Paul was prepared to argue strongly with Peter when he held Peter to be at fault.

In the eyes of the New Testament writers Peter already holds a position of special importance, not simply because of his own gifts and character but because of his particular calling by Christ. However, the traditions of the New Testament give no precise indication how this role of Peter is exercised differently from that of the other apostles. Indeed the similarity of their roles leads us to conclude that, even when the distinctive features of Peter's ministry are stressed, this ministry is not placed above that of the other apostles.

As in the teaching of Jesus true leadership is that of service, not of domination over others (Luke 22:24-27), so Peter's role in strengthening the brethren is a leadership of service (Luke 22:31, 32). Peter serves his fellow apostles by helping them to be what they are all called to be, even if at the same time in his weakness he may require their help or correction, as is clear in his dispute with Paul. These considerations help clarify the analogy that has been drawn between the role of Peter among the apostles and that of the bishop of Rome among his fellow bishops.

The New Testament contains no explicit record of a transmission of Peter's leadership; nor is the transmission of apostolic authority in general very clear. Furthermore, the Petrine texts were subjected to conflicting interpretations already at the time of the Church Fathers. Yet the Church in Rome, the city in which Peter and Paul taught and were martyred, came to be recognized as possessing a unique responsibility among the other churches; its bishop was seen to exercise a special service in relation to the unity of the churches, and to fidelity to the apostolic inheritance, thus exercising among his fellow bishops functions analogous to those ascribed to Peter in the New Testament.

Fathers and doctors of the Church gradually came to interpret the New Testament data as pointing in the same direction. There are some who regard this interpretation as a questionable endorsement of a development that had already taken place. But among them it may still be possible to see a primacy of the bishop of Rome as part of God's purpose, serving the realisation of the Church's unity and catholicity.

Nevertheless this Roman leadership has at times been rejected by those who thought it was not faithful to the truth of the Gospel and hence not a true focus of unity. For ourselves we agree that a universal primacy will be needed in a re-united Church and should appropriately be the primacy of the bishop of Rome, such as we have described it.