

# ORDINARY MADE EXTRAORDINARY TRUSTING GOD'S PLAN

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As Americans, it is natural for us to think of the pope as having a certain mystique. After all, popes up to this point have all come from foreign countries, and, if they spoke English at all, they did so with some difficulty and with a pronounced accent. So, it's a bit strange to see pictures of the man who is now pope at a Chicago White Sox game rooting for his favorite hometown team. It is even stranger to hear a pope speak English as his native language, with a Midwestern accent, no less.

When it comes to the process of electing a pope, we might be tempted to think the same way. If the papacy is an amazing gift from God, with an unbroken line of succession going all the way back to St. Peter, then why doesn't the selection process feel more, well, spiritual?

In reality, the election of a pope is quite normal. A cardinal speaks, and the other cardinals debate a bit and suggest other candidates. Some cardinals might even be jockeying for position. The election of the pope looks very much like an ordinary election among ordinary people because, in a sense, it is.

In the Bible, we see that this is exactly how the Holy Spirit works: in ordinary situations, through ordinary people. For example, in the first chapter of Acts, the apostles are trying to choose a replacement for Judas. After considering several candidates, they choose Matthias by casting lots. If debating who the next pope should be at the conclave doesn't seem very holy, then casting lots—which is similar to rolling dice—seems even less so. But the apostles knew that each of the prospective candidates had walked with Jesus. So they made their decision in this very human way, trusting that the Holy Spirit would work with and through the man they chose.

In chapter 15 of Acts, there was a major debate about whether Gentiles who converted to Christianity needed to be circumcised like their Jewish brethren. We read that “the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter” with “much debate” (Acts 15:6–7). In other words, there was some disagreement. It was a messy process. If we could have been flies on the wall during this debate, I doubt it would have come across as particularly mystical or holy. Yet, at the end of the process, the apostles proclaimed that their decision “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is the key.

God works through circumstances that do not seem very “spiritual” or “mystical,” at least on the surface. He works through our normal, everyday lives, through our arguments and even our failures. If we believe and accept that God works in this way with us, why would he work any differently with the election of the new pope?

Too often, we expect that when God shows up in our lives, this will seem holy and mystical. We think it should feel different, somehow, from ordinary life. In fact, God works in the *ordinary* in an *extraordinary* way.

God works with what we give him to make something incredible. God can transform bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. He can work through ordinary water that a priest pours over

a person's head as he says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit" to make that person an adopted child of God. So he can certainly work through an ordinary election to select the next pope to lead his Church.

God works through ordinary things to give us an extraordinary life. God uses our good decisions for his glory. He can even use our bad decisions, when we surrender them to him, for his glory.

The College of Cardinals elects the pope. But they invoke the Holy Spirit to guide their choice. The Spirit is present and will work with the man they choose to lead the Church.

## **THE POPE AS OUR UNIVERSAL PASTOR**

From ancient times, God revealed himself as a shepherd to his people. "The LORD is my shepherd," David proclaims in Psalm 23:1. Through Ezekiel, God declares, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out" (Ezekiel 34:11).

Then Jesus came, saying plainly, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:14). After his resurrection, he said to Peter, "Tend my sheep" (John 21:16). Jesus passed the shepherd's staff to Peter, establishing a role that would continue through every pope, right up to Pope Leo XIV today.

The role of the pope was not invented by some Church committee as an afterthought. It was established by Christ himself, when he conferred it upon Peter. It is an essential part of God's plan to continue shepherding and fathering his people. Understanding this helps us see why our relationship with the Holy Father connects directly to our relationship with God as Father and with Jesus as the Good Shepherd. To grasp this connection more fully, we need to go back to a conversation Jesus had with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi.

## **THE PRIME MINISTER**

In chapter 16 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus journeys with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a region about thirty miles north of

Capernaum. There, he asks his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” (Matthew 16:13). They reply, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14). All of these answers, of course, were wrong. Jesus then asks, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). And Simon Peter speaks up and says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus responds, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:17–18).

At Caesarea Philippi, there was a massive rock with pagan temples built on top of it. Jesus brought his disciples there to give them a visual demonstration of what he means when he changes Simon’s name to “Peter,” meaning “rock.” It is very clear that Jesus is saying to Peter, “I will build my church upon you.”

Jesus then tells Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Now that is a lot of power. But the apostles who heard these words of Jesus would have recognized that their significance went even deeper. They just witnessed Jesus, who is the Messiah, the king who has come to reestablish the kingdom of Israel, set Simon Peter over his household.

What do we mean by that? In the kingdom of Israel in the Old Testament, there was a position called *al habayit*, which literally means “over the household.” This role is like a prime minister today. The *al habayit* would step in and rule the kingdom when the king was away. He was entrusted with the full authority of the king. As we see in Isaiah, chapter 22, the position of *al habayit* was established by God. As the LORD says, “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut,

and none shall open” (Isaiah 22:22). When Jesus says to Peter that he will give him “the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” it is clear that Jesus just made him the *al habayit*, the “prime minister” of the new kingdom, the Church.

Notice how God describes this role of authority in Isaiah: “He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah” (Isaiah 22:21). This is not just an administrative or judicial position—it is a fatherly one. The *al habayit* is called to care for God’s people with the heart of a father. Jesus, who revealed the Father during his earthly ministry, appoints Peter to continue his mission of preaching his revelation on earth.

## APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

What Jesus started with Peter and the apostles in Caesarea Philippi continues to this day. Jesus did not just give Peter authority for one generation—he established a role meant to last until he returns.

From St. Peter to Pope Leo XIV, there is an unbroken chain of succession spanning two thousand years. Every pope, including Leo XIV, inherits the mission Jesus gave to Peter at Caesarea Philippi. When Jesus promised to remain with his apostles “always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20), he meant it. The same Jesus who called Peter now works through Pope Leo XIV to shepherd his flock. This is why our relationship with the pope matters so much—he is not just another religious leader; he is the living successor of Peter himself.

People have many different opinions about what Christ taught, who he is, and what it means to follow him. This diversity of interpretations could easily fracture the Church. Knowing this, Jesus established the role of Peter as *al habayit* to continue through the generations and unite all Christians.

How does the pope unite all Christians?

The Church has a structure. Jesus is the head, and we are his body—with Christ himself as the cornerstone. Within this body,