

Why Catholics Believe What We Believe

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What if somebody asked you, “Why do you Catholics do that? Why do you Catholics believe that? No, it’s not in the Bible?”

Well, the short answer to that is, we do some things and we believe a lot of things because Jesus gave the power of the keys to St. Peter. That’s the short answer.

The longer answer is, we believe as we do and we do as we do because when Jesus gave Peter the power of the keys, of course, we’re not talking about real keys here. We’re talking about Jesus conferring authority onto St. Peter.

And as we know, authority is the right to use power, to exercise power. And so, Jesus is saying to Peter, “I’m going to make you a leader. I’m going to give you authority, and I need you to exercise that authority in my name, in matters of faith and morals, directed towards the spiritual well-being and salvation.”

In exercising this power, when we look at Church history, we see that the popes throughout the course of history—and the popes are the successors of St. Peter—all of the popes that have sat on the Chair of St. Peter have received this charism of binding and loosing.

We see this being exercised down through the course of history in the areas of teaching and governance of the Church, and spirituality and sanctification. Those are the areas where this shows up.

For example, if someone were to say to you, “Why do you Catholics believe the Assumption of Mary? It’s not in the Bible?”

Correct. It’s not explicitly in the Bible.

But after centuries of reflecting on this mystery and with the help of the Holy Spirit—remember something else that Jesus said: “I’m going to give you the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth.” With the help of Gospel reflection, with the help of the Holy Spirit, Pope Pius XII, in 1950, proclaimed Mary’s Assumption into heaven, that that should be a doctrine that all Catholics should accept as true.

And we do. And no, it is not explicitly in the Bible, but the Pope has given us that to help us on our spiritual way.

It's another piece of our faith that helps us in the spiritual life and gives us hope. And so, that's why we believe, because the Pope said so.

That's not an answer that's very satisfying to people today. But that's an answer that shows that we understand the primacy of the Pope—the primacy which Jesus gave explicitly to St. Peter and his successors.

So, that's an example of how this charism of the power of the keys might express itself when it comes to Church teaching and doctrine. But it also expresses itself when it comes to sin and sanctification.

So, here's another question you've probably got in your lifetime: Why do Catholics go to confession to a priest?

That's not in the Bible either.

Well, we go to confession to a priest, actually now, because of the 6th-century Irish concept. Because in the 6th century, they were the ones who introduced individual confessions as we know them today—individual private confessions.

And it was, I believe, Pope Innocent III, who confirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council in the year 1215 that all Catholics should go to confession at least once a year to confess their mortal sins.

So, why do you go to confession?

Well, number one, because Jesus instituted it as a sacrament. John 20: remember what happened on Easter evening when Jesus came among the apostles and He breathed on them the Holy Spirit and said, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

We believe as Catholics that's where Jesus instituted the sacrament of confession, and that He actually wanted to, in a sense, hear your confessions and forgive sins, and that the ministry would endure in the Church.

So, another short answer: why do Catholics go to confession to a priest? Well, because Jesus and Pope Innocent III said we should.

And then another place where this charism of binding and loosing—the power of the keys to make these important decisions—shows up is in Church governance and order. And, boy, for that we go to the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

And virtually none of that we're going to find in the Bible, because it's all the rules and regulations of the Church.

And who put that on the table? Another pope.

Pope Saint John Paul II in 1983, because when you have a Church with 1.14 billion people, you need some governance.

And so, for example, why do you need a baptismal certificate? If you want to get married in the Church, why do you need a baptismal certificate brought in to the deacon or myself that's only six months old? Why can't you bring in a baptismal certificate that's stuck in the Bible when you were baptized, you know, 20, 25 years ago?

Because the newer baptismal certificate has a lot of information on it that we need, because a lot has happened to you since your baptism regarding the sacraments. And that's not in the Bible, is it?

All those kinds of rules and regulations are there for the spiritual good of the faithful and for the order and well-ordering of the Church and the administration of the sacraments.

So, when people ask us as Catholics, "Why do we believe something, or why don't we do something?" you can probably name a pope who signed some kind of decree to put it on the table as part of our apostolic faith and something that they want us to be aware of and use to help us in our spiritual growth.

So, today, let's consider Leo XIV, who also has received the power as successor of Saint Peter. And let's pray for him that he will use that charism wisely and courageously to lead his flock.

And while we know that this is a tremendous responsibility, let us also pray for all the bishops in communion with our Holy Father, that they will be faithful to their apostolic offices.

So, when people ask us, "Why do Catholics do this, and why do Catholics do that?" remember this Gospel, and you can start the conversation by saying, "Because Jesus, in His wisdom, gave Saint Peter the power of the keys." He must have thought that it was going to work, because at the end He added, "And the gates of hell will not prevail against you."