

[‘Upon This Rock’](#) : A “National Catholic Register” Review

Written by David Palm

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Along with the renaissance of Catholic apologetics in general has come, appropriately enough, a renaissance in apologetic works aimed at defending and explaining the papacy. Ultimately issues of authority lie at the heart of any discussion of the Christian faith. And the issue of the papacy lies at the heart of the discussion of authority with non-Catholic Christians, whether Protestant or Eastern Orthodox. In [Upon This Rock](#), Steve Ray has served up a vigorous presentation of the evidence supporting the Catholic doctrine of the papacy. Any Catholic interested in learning more about this important aspect of our faith, or seeking to explain it to others, will find this volume a veritable one-stop-shop for the best supporting evidence.

The work is divided roughly into three sections. The first deals with St. Peter himself. Ray starts with a major focus on the biblical data pertinent to St. Peter. There’s a lot of it. Indeed, there’s so much of it that it continues to amaze to find our separated brethren claiming that the Bible has nothing special to say about St. Peter and his prerogatives. Well, the first section of *Upon This Rock* answers that claim handily.

As Cardinal Christoph Schönborn comments in his commendation on the back cover, Ray does a superb job covering the Old Testament background to the papacy. In this first chapter, as well as in an appendix entitled “*An Old Testament Basis for the Primacy and Succession of St. Peter*,” he shows the numerous parallels between the monarchies of the ancient Far East and the papacy as constituted by our Lord Jesus Himself. This facet of the papacy is important in more ways than one. First, it highlights a distinct linearity of revelation, an unbroken trajectory if you will between the Old Testament and the New. There is great apologetic value in showing non-Catholic Christians”Evangelicals and Fundamentalists especially”the continuity between Old and New Covenants and the extent to which one may view the papacy even as a prophetic fulfillment of Old Testament foreshadowing. And I think any Catholic in dialogue with non-Catholics will find that the Old Testament background laid out by Ray is a significant boost when seeking to demonstrate succession of the Petrine office.

The New Testament too brings forth numerous examples of the primacy of St. Peter and the special prerogatives given to him by Jesus Christ. Ray brings to bear numerous insights on the biblical text, gleaned from Scripture scholars, archeological evidence, and Jewish background information. In addition to presenting a full-orbed positive case for the Petrine primacy from the biblical text, Ray here engages (as he does throughout the book) non-Catholic arguments leveled against this evidence. This is extremely helpful.

It's all too easy for Catholics to be swayed by a quick, sound-bite argument fired by a non-Catholic in a discussion or debate. *Upon This Rock* soundly and vigorously rebuts the most popular anti-Catholic arguments against the primacy of St. Peter and the papacy. Perhaps this will go some way, too, toward silencing the contention that Catholic apologists are ignoring the opposition. One suspects that after reading this work the opposition might wish that Ray had ignored them.

Also in the section on St. Peter is a lengthy treatment on the evidence for his presence in Rome. One hopes "perhaps against hope" that the historical evidence presented in *Upon This Rock* will finally put to rest the contention in some non-Catholic circles that St. Peter never even made it to Rome. Ray traces the history of this rather desperate position and shows that it is purely a product of anti-Catholic sentiment rather than sober reflection on the available evidence. He then presents a wide sampling of that evidence from a variety of sources: literary, inscriptional, and archeological. May that particular thorn in the Catholic's flesh be banished forever.

The second section of the book treats the evidence illuminating the primacy of the successors of St. Peter in the earliest testimony of the Church. Although this ambitious project ostensibly covers the first five centuries of Church history, the greatest strength of this book lies in its exploration of the earliest sources that illuminate the papacy. So much material has been lost from the first, second, and early third centuries of the Church that there is just not as much as we would like to have on any subject. This makes all the more impressive the extent to which the Petrine and Roman primacy was in evidence even in the earliest centuries. As he forges into the third, fourth, and fifth centuries of the Church, Ray has to be considerably more selective; frankly, there's just so much evidence there for the Catholic view of the papacy that it's impossible to pack it all between two covers.

Several portions of this section of the book really shine. The treatment on St. Cyprian is outstanding. The testimony of this early Father of the Church is frequently wielded as proof against papal claims. Now St. Cyprian did indeed run personally afoul of the reigning pontiff of his day and so made some rather stern statements in his rebellion. But Ray shows that others of his statements are inexplicable unless he held to the Petrine primacy. And beyond his words, St. Cyprian's actions speak even louder. On several occasions we find St. Cyprian appealing to the authority of Rome against his opponents, despite his chafing at submitting to that authority himself.

The treatment of the patristic interpretation of Matt 16:18–19 is equally good. Catholics may easily be bamboozled by snappy claims or statistics tossed out in a book, article, or at a debate that the Church Fathers did not understand "the rock" in this passage of Scripture to be St. Peter himself but rather his faith, his confession, or even our Lord. Nonsense, as *Upon This Rock* makes clear. Citing numerous concrete examples, Ray shows that the Fathers consistently uphold the literal and primary meaning of the text, namely, that St. Peter is the rock upon which our Lord Jesus promises to build His Church. Ray shows that the "either-or" approach dealt out by Protestant and Orthodox apologists "either the rock of Matt 16:18 is St. Peter himself or it is his faith" is a false dichotomy. Rather, the true patristic position is "both-and". The literal, foundational

meaning of Matt 16:18 is that the Lord Jesus calls St. Peter the rock and promises to build the Church upon him. From that literal, bedrock interpretation flow several figurative, secondary interpretations—a technique of biblical interpretation evidenced even in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The section on St. Augustine is really fine as well. On topic after topic, Protestant Christians seek to hijack that great Western Father and make him one of their own. His views of the papacy are no exception. And again and again, most recently and very impressively in *Upon This Rock*, Catholics demonstrate that he was nothing if not a faithful son of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the final section of the book Ray lays out current Church teaching on the papacy, showing both the development of the doctrine over the centuries and the great harmony that exists between the teaching of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century and the witnesses to the primacy of the successors of St. Peter in the first centuries of the Church age.

The multifaceted approach—biblical, historical, and contemporary—to the understanding of the papacy is a valuable aspect of the work. It is neither reasonable nor consistent to insist, as too many non-Catholics do, that the Catholic must either demonstrate the fully-formed papacy directly from the Bible and earliest antiquity or the doctrine is untenable. Rather, as Ray argues, doctrine and belief in the Church shows an organic growth throughout the centuries. This growth is inevitable and expected; all living organisms (and that's what the Church is) grow in this way. Having demonstrated this, Ray shows that non-Catholic Christians impose a double standard on the Catholic—their doctrine is allowed to develop over centuries (as must be admitted in the case of the canon of Scripture and the definition of the Blessed Trinity) but Catholic appeals to development are hooted down as special pleading.

Ray's use of non-Catholic sources is noteworthy. He draws on non-Catholic sources in two ways. First, he utilizes the scholarship of Protestant, Orthodox, and even non-religious scholars to show that even these non-Catholic scholars affirm many of the exegetical and historical points that Catholics deploy in support of the papacy. This use of non-Catholic sources by Catholic apologists has been criticized by some as disingenuous, since the scholars being cited would never agree to the conclusions which are drawn from their work. I suggest that these naysayers too conveniently forget that “hostile” witnesses are summoned every day in courtrooms throughout the world; it is a standard and highly effective practice when arguing a case. I suspect that much of the motivation behind the grousing at Catholic use of non-Catholic sources in apologetics stems from how effective it is. But all that aside, Ray is careful to indicate (as if it weren't already obvious) that the scholars in question do not agree with his final conclusions. And with that caveat, his inclusion of supporting testimony from non-Catholic sources makes for a significantly stronger case.

But Ray also engages non-Catholic sources in another way. Throughout history, a great many non-Catholics have taken it upon themselves to attack the doctrine of the papacy.

The renewed vibrancy and success of Catholic apologetics has called forth a spate of new books seeking to refute Catholic papal claims. There are also numerous Web sites, magazine articles, and cassette tapes of debates wherein Protestants or Orthodox seek to puncture the papacy. Ray goes head to head with these arguments, showing the selective use of evidence, special pleading, faulty logic, or often just plain misunderstanding of the Catholic position that lies behind them. While some might find this kind of argumentation distasteful, the fact is that far too many Catholics have been led away from the Catholic Church into various Christian and non-Christian sects for lack of some fundamental answers to basic challenges. As it stands, Ray deploys these counter-arguments with vigor, but always with fairness and charity toward his opponents.

If I have any criticism of the work at all it is primarily functional. There are copious footnotes, set in small type. The combination of the need to move between text and footnotes while following the diminutive text may be a bit difficult for the optically challenged. And the book makes for challenging reading in places. But this is not meant as a criticism. I mean simply that the reader is expected to do some work, examining the evidence cited and following argument and counter-argument. This is extremely welcome and healthy in a day-and-age in which what passes for the Catholic religion has in many quarters been reduced to feelings and emotions. Ample evidence of this shift in Catholic mindset comes from the contents of the book itself. Ray resurrects and re-presents numerous pieces of evidence and arguments in support of the papacy that have been “buried” in dusty volumes written decades and even centuries ago. The evidence and arguments are, of course, still perfectly valid. But modern Catholics have fallen victim to a kind of collective amnesia and political correctness such that solid argumentation in support of our faith is considered gauche . So thanks be to God for volumes like *Upon This Rock* which bring back to our eyes and minds the wonderful, affirming support that the Catholic doctrine of the papacy finds written large throughout Scripture, sacred Tradition, and the history of the early Church.

Reviewed by David Palm, 17 May 1999, St. Joseph’s Haven