

KEEPERS OF THE
KEYS OF HEAVEN

— *A History of the Papacy* —

ROGER COLLINS



A Member of the Perseus Books Group

New York

CONTENTS

	Preface	v
	Maps	vii
<i>chapter 1</i>	BISHOP OF ROME	1
<i>chapter 2</i>	PRIMACY IS GIVEN TO PETER	22
<i>chapter 3</i>	THE SUCCESSOR OF THE FISHERMAN	35
<i>chapter 4</i>	PETER HIMSELF	58
<i>chapter 5</i>	THE TWO SWORDS	77
<i>chapter 6</i>	SLAVE OF THE SLAVES OF GOD	98
<i>chapter 7</i>	THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM	117
<i>chapter 8</i>	JUDGING ALL MEN, JUDGED BY NONE	145
<i>chapter 9</i>	OUR MOTHER THE HOLY ROMAN CHURCH	166
<i>chapter 10</i>	FREE, CHASTE AND CATHOLIC	195
<i>chapter 11</i>	THE SUCCESSOR NOT OF PETER BUT OF CONSTANTINE	220
<i>chapter 12</i>	LESS THAN GOD BUT GREATER THAN MAN	245
<i>chapter 13</i>	FALSE GUILT-LADEN BABYLON	272
<i>chapter 14</i>	THREE BISHOPS ON ONE SEAT	297
<i>chapter 15</i>	A LEADER OF THE WORLD, NOT OF THE CHURCH	317
<i>chapter 16</i>	BEAUTIFUL AS A DOVE	343

<i>chapter 17</i>	SUNDIAL OF THE CHURCH	368
<i>chapter 18</i>	THE LAST POPE	392
<i>chapter 19</i>	THE LAST GREAT THING LEFT TO ITALY	414
<i>chapter 20</i>	THE PRISONER OF THE VATICAN	448
<i>chapter 21</i>	THE IMPREGNABLE ROCK OF PETER	474
	List of Popes	499
	Abbreviations	507
	Notes	509
	Selected Bibliography	535
	Index	549

BISHOP OF ROME

(C. AD 30–180)

A STORY OF BONES

One evening in early 1942, in Rome, after the great basilica of St. Peter's had closed its doors for the night, the man in charge of the building, Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, descended into the archaeological excavations beneath it. With him was the foreman of the Vatican workforce carrying out the dig, Giovanni Segoni, who was keeping Kaas informed of everything the excavators were doing. This included their recent uncovering, just beneath St. Peter's sixteenth-century high altar, of a small wall, one side of which was covered with roughly carved inscriptions and graffiti.

The archaeologists and excavation team had gone for the day. The two men were alone. And now Segoni showed Kaas an even more recent discovery. Within the little wall, the team had found a small concealed rectangular space lined with marble. In it were bones, which the archaeologists had not yet had time to examine, let alone record. Kaas told Segoni to remove and carry them as they returned to the surface.¹ As a way of handling important archaeological evidence, few things could have been less professional, but these were most unusual excavations, carried out under conditions of utmost secrecy and rigid discipline, with a chain of command extending all the way up to the pope, Pius XII (1939–1958).²

The dig had begun after a discovery made in February 1939, when a tomb was being prepared for his predecessor, Pius XI (1922–1939), in the grotto underneath St. Peter's, long the site of papal burials. In

the course of that work a Roman cemetery, dating to the first and second centuries AD, had been found beneath the grotto. Originally this cemetery had been on ground level and consisted of streets of tombs that looked like little houses and were owned by wealthy families. The area in which it stood had been buried when a small hill was flattened during the construction of the earliest church on the site, which was built in the mid-fourth century over what was long believed to be the burial place of St. Peter.

The presence of St. Peter in Rome, his role in the founding of the Church in the city and his martyrdom and burial there had for centuries been the subject of often heated debate between Protestants and Catholics. Excavation of a site linked to Peter's tomb, but whose results could not be predicted, could strengthen or weaken not just scholarly arguments but also the faith of hundreds of millions of believers. And so the Vatican decided that the dig should be carried out in complete secrecy, with nothing being announced until the results had been carefully reviewed. Although at first forbidden to approach the area immediately under the high altar, the excavations soon began to produce more and more intriguing results the closer they came to it, and in 1941 an extension was permitted to allow inclusion of this, the most sensitive part of the site.

As well as having the potential for theological fallout, the excavations had to be watched for any threat they might pose to the stability of the enormous church below which they were burrowing. For both reasons, while directed on a daily basis by scholars trained in archaeology and epigraphy, the study of inscriptions, overall charge resided with Monsignor Kaas. His own training and experience as a priest, a professor of canon law and a politician were very different from those of the archaeologists whose work he now had to monitor.³ Although he never himself explained why he ordered the removal and concealment of the bones, he apparently had little sympathy with archaeologists, whom, he felt, rarely treated human remains with proper respect. In any case these bones mattered less at the time than some others that had been discovered nearby a few weeks earlier. To that other set of bones we now briefly turn.

In 1941, when digging was extended to the area below the high altar, a red painted wall was found that had probably once formed part of a small open enclosure at the back of a street of Roman house-tombs. The archaeologists hypothesised that onto this wall a narrow stone table had been built supported on two legs at the front and with a small stone roof over it. It was located immediately below what became the altar of the first Church of St. Peter's, and above which now stands the present sixteenth-century high altar. The assumption seemed irresistible that the place marked by this small stone table, which the archaeologists dated to the later second century, had been specially revered by successive generations of Christians.

Further excavation revealed that concealed below and at a slight angle to this shrine was a rectangular enclosure extending under the red wall. In other words, it pre-dated that wall and could be assumed to be the repository of whatever it was that the small table-shaped shrine was commemorating. When news of this discovery and of the presence within it of bones was mentioned to Pius XII, he himself descended into the excavations and sat on a stool beside the site while the archaeologists reverently handed out the fragments of bone into his keeping. The possibility that the relics being removed were indeed those of the first of Christ's Apostles must have been in the minds of all present. Nothing, however, could be said publicly, even when the pope's personal doctor, Riccardo Galeazzi-Lisi, to whom the bones were entrusted for examination, quickly determined that they belonged to a powerfully built man about sixty-five to seventy years old.

One consequence of the doctor's hasty verdict was that when the very small graffiti-covered wall was subsequently uncovered nearby and was found to contain more bones, they seemed of minor importance. The real significance of this wall was thought to lie in the inscriptions on it. Some of these were simple personal names like Severa or Leonta, but others were explicitly Christian prayers for the dead. One fragmentary one was interpreted as being an invocation to St. Peter. Together these inscriptions seemed to confirm the Christian

significance of the site and a possible special association with the Prince of the Apostles. As it was also clear that this small wall was built after the red one that it existed to support, little attention needed to be given to bones housed in it when others had already been found below the earlier one.

Unfortunately, Pius XII's doctor had been inspired more by enthusiasm than by forensic skill, as he was not a specialist in the identification of bones. While the private discussions continued about what to do with the discoveries, it became clear that before any announcement was made, the bones should be studied more thoroughly. An expert, Professor Venerando Correnti, was called in under terms of absolute secrecy to carry out a full investigation. This caution proved wise, as he concluded that the bones came from not one man, but two, plus a woman, a chicken, a pig, a goat or sheep and possibly a mouse.⁴

While it was possible that one of the men was Peter, the discovery of the bones under the red wall could not now be included in any announcement about the excavations and their results. Finally, just before Christmas 1950, in a radio broadcast, Pius XII revealed the existence of the dig. He played down the chances of finding the physical remains of St. Peter and concentrated instead on the evidence found for early veneration of the site as the presumed burial place of the Apostle. When the official two-volume report by the archaeologists came out in 1951, it barely mentioned bones.⁵ Other scholars were permitted to publish on the subject only if they agreed not to make use of any information that was not contained in the official report (and not reveal the existence of this restriction).⁶ Meanwhile, the bones removed from the graffiti-covered wall remained unstudied and forgotten until 1953, the year after the death of Monsignor Kaas, when Giovanni Segoni, who had taken them from the wall, mentioned them to Professor Margherita Guarducci, an authority on inscriptions who was working on the messages on the wall. He was able to lead her to the bones themselves, in Kaas's former office, and to the wooden box in which they were said to have originally been found. She had the bones examined by Professor Correnti, who confirmed that they came from a well-built man, probably in his sixties.

The caution that had saved the Vatican from making embarrassing claims about the significance of the red-wall bones might have militated against public statements about the bones from the graffiti wall, but Guarducci was a family friend of Pope Paul VI (1963–1978). He was persuaded by her conviction that the bones were highly likely to be Peter's, because they were from a sexagenarian and located in a place long associated with the Apostle. And so, on 26 June 1968, Paul announced that the bones of St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, had been discovered, not mentioning the previous uncertainties and changes of opinion.⁷

If Pope Paul's statement about the discovery of Peter's bones could not be openly contested, not everyone was convinced by the claim and what lay behind it. Among the doubters was one of the two original excavators, Professor Antonio Ferrua S.J., who as an authority on epigraphy had clashed with Guarducci on other occasions.⁸ While academic point scoring and personal antipathies may have added to the complexities of the various discoveries and claims made about them, it has to be admitted that the sceptics have the stronger case.

There are two crucial breaks in the chain of evidence, and the scene was contaminated twice. The first break happened as long ago as the second century. If the rectangular hollow under the red wall pre-dates the building of that wall, as indeed it must, and if the wall itself was erected in the second century, which is a less secure claim, then bones buried in that space could date from the late first century, and thus the time of Peter. However, the bones that Paul VI said were Peter's come from the graffitied wall built to buttress the red wall. A date no earlier than 200 has been suggested for its construction. So, the bones buried within it cannot have been there before that date. They may, of course, have been transferred from somewhere else, but their lack of a distinctive staining indicates that they had not previously resided in the location under the red wall in which the other set of miscellaneous human and animal bones were found. To add to all these uncertainties, it has recently been suggested that the archaeologists' reconstruction of what they regarded as a table-shaped shrine at the red wall is based more on speculation than on evidence, and that whatever its nature and purpose, it may actually date from the

early fourth century rather than the end of the second. This leaves the dating of anything found under it far less secure than the excavation report implies.⁹

The second break in the chain of evidence comes with Kaas's removal of the bones from the graffitied wall in 1942. If his motive had been the reverential treatment of human remains, it has to be wondered why he did not have them reburied. More importantly, we do not know what became of them between their removal from the graffitied wall in 1942 and the handing over to Guarducci in 1953 of a set of bones said to be the same ones.

Professor Guarducci was convinced not only that they were the very same ones, but more importantly that they were indeed those of St. Peter. She dedicated her 1995 book about the discovery of the bones 'to the Church of Christ, which through providential design is founded at Rome upon the authentic and extraordinary relics of Peter.'¹⁰ As we have seen, by more objective standards, the outcome proved at best inconclusive, but the questions that might have been answered lie at the heart of the papacy's claim to a unique authority within Christianity, and to the way that claim is so indissolubly tied to both St. Peter, considered the Prince of the Apostles, and to the city of Rome.

ST. PETER AND ROME

The status of the popes as successors of Peter relies upon distinct strands of argument that seem so tightly interwoven as to be inseparable. One of these relates to the role played by Peter as the first called and the leader of Jesus' twelve Apostles, and in particular on the authority given him by Christ. His standing depends upon the meaning ascribed to sayings in the Gospels of Matthew and of John, in which Jesus appears to invest him with particular responsibilities and authority. In Matt. 16. 18–19, after Peter's recognition of him as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God', Jesus says: 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth

shall be considered loosed in heaven.”¹¹ At the end of John’s Gospel, in the accounts of the post-Resurrection appearances, there is a prophecy about Peter’s death: “when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21. 18–19)¹²

There are three widely held beliefs about what happened to Peter in the decades between the Crucifixion, traditionally dated to AD 30, and his own death around 65/70. The first is that at some point he lived in Rome. The second is that if he did not actually found the Christian community in the city, he, together with Paul, established an institutional structure for its Church, either appointing or serving as its first bishop. The third is that he was martyred in Rome during a persecution of Christians and was buried in a site near the city, whose location remained known to successive generations of his fellow believers.

That neither Peter nor Paul actually founded the Church in Rome, in the sense of establishing the first community of Christians in the city, is now generally accepted. Exactly when the first Christians appeared there is uncertain. It is clear, though, that there were a considerable number by AD 49, when the emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) expelled from Rome those Jews, generally assumed to refer to Christians, who were creating disturbances ‘under the influence of *Chrestus*’.¹³

This was long before either Peter or Paul could have arrived in the city. We know from Paul’s own Epistle to the Romans, written sometime around AD 56 or 58, that he had not yet visited Rome but was hoping he soon would. That he did so a year or two later under the rather different circumstances of being kept there for two years under house arrest, waiting for a trial before the emperor that probably never took place, is recorded in Acts, which ends its narrative at that point (Acts 28. 30–31). Peter’s presence in Rome is much harder to document. This problem has provided intellectual ammunition over the centuries for those, not just Protestants, who have

wanted to challenge papal authority by trying to undermine its historical foundations.¹⁴

While Peter's presence in Rome cannot be proved, it is generally accepted as highly probable on other grounds. Perhaps the most significant of these is the fact that no other Christian community claimed that it was in their city that he died and was buried. The church of Antioch, like that of Rome, came to regard Peter as its founder and first bishop, but Antioch never suggested that he remained there until his death or that he was buried there. By the early fourth century at the latest, there was a general agreement amongst Christians that Peter had been bishop in Antioch but then moved on to Rome, where he met his death.

There are two texts that might support the idea that Peter was closely associated with the Christians in Rome from an early date. One is the anonymous letter known as the First Epistle of Clement. Its author was writing on behalf of the Christian community in Rome to encourage the Corinthian Christians to settle an internal dispute, and he cites Peter and Paul: 'Peter, who because of unrighteous jealousy suffered not one or two but many trials, and having thus given his testimony went to the glorious place which was his due.'¹⁵ This passage might imply that Peter met a violent end and so may be the earliest reference to his martyrdom.

On Paul, Clement is more eloquent: 'Through jealousy and strife Paul showed the way to the prize of endurance; seven times he was in bonds, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a herald both in the East and the West, he gained the noble fame of his faith, he taught righteousness to all the world, and when he had reached the limits of the West he gave his testimony before rulers, and thus passed from the world and was taken up into the Holy Place, the greatest example of endurance.'¹⁶ Again, this might substantiate the belief that Paul was martyred.

The date of this letter is not easy to establish. Often stated belief that it was written around AD 96 depends on mention in the opening section of 'sudden and repeated misfortunes and calamities', seen as a reference to persecution of Christians in the mid-90s under the emperor Domitian (81-96), but there is no certainty that such persecu-

tion actually occurred. One prominent scholar has noted that the letter could just as easily have been written twenty years later.¹⁷

The second piece of evidence is a mention of Peter and Paul in a letter sent to Rome's Christians by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch. At the time of writing, Ignatius was being transported to Rome to be executed as a Christian. Although he had been tried and condemned in Antioch, he was one of many sent to the imperial capital to be killed during public spectacles provided by the emperors. On his journey, Ignatius wrote a series of short letters to the Christian communities in the cities through which he passed, but he also sent one on ahead to the Christians in Rome, asking them not to appeal for clemency from the emperor. He wanted his sentence to be carried out and was worried that some well-meaning and influential fellow believers might get an imperial pardon for him, thus preventing him from following Christ's example even to death. He wrote, 'I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; they were Apostles, I am a convict; they were free, I am even now a slave.'¹⁸ The mention of Peter and Paul and the implication that they issued commands to the Christians in Rome suggest that together they had a special relationship with the city.

The difficulties dating Ignatius' letter are even greater than with Clement's, not least as it only survives as part of a much later text. The traditional view that he wrote around the year 117 is based on nothing more than a guess made around 325, by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 314–339/40) in his *History of the Church*. But it is now generally agreed that Ignatius' writings and execution cannot be dated more precisely than to sometime between AD 125 and 150.

If there are grounds for believing that both Peter and Paul lived in Rome and died there, does this also mean that either of them was the first bishop of the city, or that one or the other appointed someone else to that office? The claim that they did make such an appointment first appears around AD 180, in a book written in Greek by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon in what is now southern France. This work lacks a title but has long been known as *Against the Heresies*, since its aim was to combat several variant forms of Christian belief that were then influential. Included in it is a list of all the bishops of Rome ever since the Roman church had been 'founded and set up by the two

most glorious apostles Peter and Paul’, who are also said to have ‘delivered the ministry of the episcopate to Linus’.¹⁹ Although neither Peter nor Paul actually created the Christian community in Rome, Irenaeus might just be implying that theirs was the formative influence on Roman Christianity in its earliest phase. If so, could his claim that they appointed the first bishop, Linus, be correct?

Irenaeus was not the only person who thought so. About twenty years after he wrote, another list appeared. Its author was a teacher and orator in Carthage in North Africa, Tertullian (died c. 212), who wrote a series of short and vigorous treatises in Latin on moral and doctrinal issues affecting the Christian community of his city. Like Irenaeus, he used the continuity of the episcopal office in Rome from the time of the Apostles as an argument against theological opponents. However, he claimed that Peter himself had been the first bishop.²⁰ This, together with a difference in the order of some names of the bishops, proves that Tertullian was not just copying from Irenaeus.

Cumulatively, this looks like pretty good evidence, allowing for how little of the literary output of the early Christians has been preserved, and we might be happy to accept the testimony of two independent authors writing relatively close in time to the events described. Admittedly, there is still a gap of a century to a century and a half between the presumed period in which Peter and Paul were in Rome and the time at which Irenaeus and the others were writing.²¹ Ultimately, however, the testimony of these writers was in error, for the office of bishop, as Irenaeus and Tertullian understood it, simply did not exist in the time of Peter and Paul.

THE FIRST BISHOP

The early growth of the administrative organisation of the Christian movement and the emergence within it of a clerical caste remain obscure and controversial. But these were in fact separate processes. For one thing the first generations of Christians may have expected an imminent *Parousia* or Second Coming of Christ, making organisational structures unnecessary. Such a phase seems to have been short-lived, for Paul in his later letters was no longer expecting it in his

own lifetime. His epistles are our best evidence for how the Christians tried to run their communities at this time. Groups of elders, similar to those found in contemporary synagogues, took the lead in each community, assisted by deacons who were responsible for the charitable care of widows, orphans and other vulnerable members. The only formal meeting was the weekly community meal. This too may be a vestige of Judaic practice, from a time when the Christians still attended synagogue services. The Pharisees as a similar rigorist group within Judaism used to meet for a meal shared only amongst themselves on the evening preceding the Sabbath, just as Christians began doing on the day following it.

Several dimly recorded processes then took place as Christianity freed itself from its Jewish roots and as expectations of an imminent Second Coming waned.²² The communal meal, which as described by Paul was essentially a convivial occasion, divided into two separate parts. The weekly meal remained as an *agape*, or love feast, available to all, but a separate Eucharistic service for full members of the community was celebrated on a different day. Exactly when this development took place is not clear, and it probably emerged at different times in different communities. Its significance is considerable for two reasons: The Eucharistic service required a celebrant, essentially to imitate Christ's role in the Last Supper; and full membership of the community became something that had to be attained, rather than being open to all immediately after they accepted the Christian message. The transition was effected through and marked by baptism, which thus also became a sacred rite requiring the presence of an officiant. As these baptismal and Eucharistic ceremonies became formalised, the need grew for a class of ritual specialists. They were important not so much for knowing what to do, since the proceedings were relatively simple, as for possessing a special state of purity or spiritual elevation that distinguished them from fellow believers. In other words what emerged was a Christian clerical elite.

To try to decide if the ceremonies created the clergy or the clergy the ceremonies is to fail to answer the conundrum about the chicken and the egg. They probably helped each other. Clearly, neither the writings of Paul nor the Gospel narratives of the life and teaching of

Jesus indicate the presence or anticipation of a Christian priesthood or of baptism marking the transition from one level of membership of the community to another. These were developments of the late first and early second centuries.

Bishops (overseers) appeared in some Christian communities as the leaders of the groups of elders, being chosen by election and quite likely for life.²³ Probably as a second stage in this development, such existing chief elders took on the primary roles in the new sacred ceremonies that were becoming increasingly standardised. Again, it is worth stressing that there was no overall organisational structure for the Christian church in these early centuries, and thus individual groups followed different practices or gradually adopted ones that were starting to gain general agreement. This point is illustrated by the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, previously mentioned. In the messages he sent to the various Christian communities he came in contact with on his way to Rome, he almost always urged on them the importance of obedience to their bishops. This has been seen to imply that he was trying to promote acceptance of something that was still very new and controversial.²⁴

One crucial consequence of the rise not just of a clergy but of a hierarchy within it was the fairly rapid marginalising and then elimination in most communities of women as office holders and leaders. As Jewish society had been very patriarchal, it may be that in some Christian groups women had never played a leading or teaching role, but there is plenty of evidence to show that they did in others. A well-documented case is that of Prisca, who shared the leadership of one of the communities in Rome with her husband, Aquila.²⁵ Women also served as deacons, and some groups, expecting divine guidance from the inspired utterances of individuals in some form of trance or ecstasy, allowed a special role for prophets, including women such as the four daughters of the Apostle Philip. Even after the rise of a professional clergy, there is evidence of some Christian communities having women priests as well as deacons, though the numbers decline rapidly in the course of the second and early third centuries.²⁶

The decline in the role of women as leaders and teachers in the early Church seems to correlate fairly closely to the rise of a hierar-

chical sacramental priesthood, which needed to be set apart from lay believers, just as these latter came to be divided into the two categories of catechumens and full initiates.²⁷ Pressure for greater uniformity led to the disappearance of several once central features of early Christian practice and to communities that would not conform being regarded as heretical or outside the body of the true believers.

As suggested by the letters of Ignatius, from the period roughly AD 125 to 150, the emergence of a clerical hierarchy with special ritual functions and an exclusive role in the leadership of their fellow believers was well under way but no means universally welcomed by all Christian groups. His letter to the Romans is particularly important in this respect, because it helps confirm that the process had hardly begun in the city of Rome by this time. Not only were there no bishops, as we understand the word, in the time of Peter and Paul, they were actually slower to appear in Rome than in almost any other part of the Roman empire.

This is not as paradoxical as it may seem, since the sheer size of Rome would have made it hard for Christians to create a single organisational structure or congregate in one part of the city. Because the earliest Christian groups grew out of the Jewish community, their presence in Rome probably mirrored that of the Jews, with particular concentrations in certain neighborhoods, notably Trastevere. As the new faith began making converts, probably mostly amongst immigrants and across a growing range of social classes, the dispersal of Christians throughout the city intensified. Because of the persecution of Christians by Nero around AD 64, it became prudent to live and meet in small groups, and avoid congregating in public in large numbers. Because they worshiped in rooms dedicated to the purpose in private houses and kept their meetings very discreet, creating a clerical hierarchy exercising authority over the different Christian groups in the city proved a slow process.

Indications of this can be found in texts produced by Christian writers in Rome in the late first and second centuries. The author of the Epistle of Clement may have been the man of this name later described as the person responsible for drafting communications sent on behalf of the Christians of Rome to other churches.²⁸ But by the

time of Tertullian and Irenaeus, Clement was listed as the second or third bishop of Rome.

This difference of perspective on Clement is telling. The late-second-century authors were probably reporting a tradition that had grown up in Rome in which leading figures amongst the elders of their day were retrospectively turned into bishops, to produce a continuous list of holders of the office stretching back to Peter. Why this happened can be explained, but it would be helpful to ask which of the people named by Irenaeus and Tertullian should be regarded as the first real bishop of the city. Most scholars now agree that the answer would be Anicetus, who comes in tenth on both lists, and whose episcopate likely covered the years 155 to 166.²⁹

Not everyone is convinced that what has been called a monarchic bishop, with unquestioned authority over all of the Christian clergy in the city, was to be found in Rome even as early as this, and Fabian (236–250) has been proposed as the first bishop of Rome in the full sense.³⁰ It is probably not necessary to take so extreme a view. The idea that in principle there should be a single bishop at the head of the whole Christian community of the city existed from well before his time. On the other hand, even after 250 the authority of the bishop over all of the Christians in the city could not easily be enforced, as it was impossible to impose uniformity in so large a city, when the Christians remained legally proscribed and in danger of prosecution by the state.

DEFINING THE FAITH

If the office of bishop only appeared in Rome in the mid-second century, it might be asked why within a generation it was thought to have existed since the time of Peter and Paul, more than a century earlier. In part this was because the process was a gradual one. Although divided into many small groups centred on house-churches scattered across the city, the Christians in Rome had early on developed a sense of community, as can be seen from Paul's Epistle that addressed them as a whole. By the end of the first century, they were choosing office holders such as Clement to carry out tasks on behalf

of the whole Christian body, and there were meetings of the leaders of the different house-churches, who thus formed a body of senior elders. It was then a relatively small step to choose one of these as the president of the whole community and the head of its clergy, as both the organisational structure of the local church and its forms of worship became more complex.

This may explain why Irenaeus and Tertullian's apparent rewriting of the history of Christianity in Rome provoked no evident disagreement. Why they were so keen to present the Roman church as one ruled by an unbroken succession of bishops since the time of the Apostles is another matter. What is significant is that both authors produced their lists of bishops in writings that were explicitly controversial and intended to combat theological opponents. Neither was interested in the history of the Church in Rome for its own sake. The existence of the line of bishops they described was a central plank in their arguments. Both were appealing to it as a source of authority to be preferred to that claimed by their adversaries, the Gnostics.

The various individuals and groups now known as Gnostics did not belong to a unified movement. They only came to be lumped together in a later period, when the differences in their views no longer mattered and when their beliefs had been definitively condemned and declared heretical.³¹ In the first and second centuries, however, there was no absolute orthodoxy against which their interpretations of Christianity could be measured. A consensus of opinion on what constituted the authoritative books of Christian teaching, that collection of texts we call the New Testament, was only starting to form and would not be fully achieved before the fourth century.³² There was also no individual, committee or council of leaders within the Christian movement that could pronounce on which beliefs and practices were acceptable and which were not.

This was particularly true of Rome with its numerous small groups of believers. Different Christian teachers and organisers of house-churches offered a variety of interpretations of the faith and attracted particular followings, rather in the way that modern denominations provide choice for worshipers looking for practices that particularly appeal to them on emotional, intellectual, aesthetic or

other grounds. The range of opinion extended, for example, from traditional Jewish Christians, who continued to obey the ritual requirements of Judaism, to the followers of Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament and accepted only parts of just one Gospel, that of Luke.

The difference between those two extremes lay in the attitude towards the Jewish heritage of Christianity, something that became increasingly contentious as the influence of Greek ideas on the interpretation of the Christian message grew throughout the second century. One of several ways this showed itself was in the belief that the real teachings of Jesus were hidden and esoteric and could only be revealed to believers by enlightened teachers or through revelations in dreams and visions. This is the origin of the term Gnostic applied to those who came to accept such views, as it was a secret *Gnosis* or 'knowledge' that believers had to acquire through the teaching of their spiritual master.

Such a general adjective is actually inappropriate, as it implies that this was a coherent movement or body of ideas. There were almost as many different ideas of what the true but concealed message of Christianity might be as there were teachers and leaders of Gnostic groups. Most of their teachings included ideas and language borrowed from contemporary Greek philosophical and religious speculation. All that was common to them was the conviction that the literal word of the early Christian texts was deliberately misleading and was intended to conceal the real spiritual meaning within. Thus Paul was presented by several Gnostic teachers as a master of secret wisdom and even the ultimate source of authority for their particular version of the hidden knowledge.³³ This may be why their opponents increasingly emphasised Peter's authority and downplayed Paul's.

The reasons for the rise in the second century of such groups are not hard to see. With the rapid growth of conversions to Christianity amongst non-Jews, a backlash against the strict Jewish elements in Christian thought and practice was inevitable. The language and contents of the Old Testament seemed primitive or alien to those educated in the Graeco-Roman tradition, with its intellectual and cultural heritage of classical antiquity. Meanwhile the wealthier classes

of the cities of the Roman empire, amongst whom Christians were now to be found, were becoming interested in new interpretations of Plato and other Greek philosophers and being drawn into membership of a growing range of esoteric mystery cults.

The widespread feeling in this period that real knowledge required teaching and initiation, and therefore the creation of different levels of membership within a religious group, also had an impact on Christianity. As we have seen, it was at this time that baptism became a rite of passage, to be approached only after long periods of instruction. Some acts of Christian worship were closed to those who had not yet attained this level of initiation, and a priestly hierarchy emerged to administer the rites and instruct the aspiring believers.

Emphasis on hidden knowledge meant that most of the writings of those later described as Gnostics are very obscure and far removed in style and contents both from the straightforward narratives of the Gospels and the open instruction of the Pauline letters. So it was long assumed that their works had little to do with Christianity. The discovery in 1945 of a cache of texts at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, likely part of the fourth-century library of a Christian monastic community, however, radically changed this view, for they were mostly previously unknown writings ranging from those that could be considered orthodox to the clearly Gnostic.³⁴

The Nag Hammadi discovery has made it much easier to understand why Christian Gnostic teachers flourished in Rome in the second century. Several of them were members of the clergy, and one in particular, Valentinus, may have been a serious candidate for the office of bishop around the time it was first established.³⁵ Several rival and even contradictory interpretations of the Christian message could coexist in the city so long as there was no single local authority able to rule on what was and what was not acceptable belief. Resolution of such doctrinal conflicts only became imperative when one group of believers tried to impose their views on all the rest. For example, Marcion, son of a bishop from Sinope on the Black Sea, came to Rome around 139 and began teaching that Christ had never had a physical human body and so had not suffered crucifixion ‘in the flesh’. He also taught that the god of the Old Testament was not the

real creator God but a lesser being whose work had to be corrected by Jesus and Paul. Extreme as many of his views were, it was only when in 144 he called a meeting of the presbyters, the leaders of the various Christian communities in Rome, and tried to persuade them to accept his ideas that he was excommunicated and a large donation he had made to the charitable funds of the Roman church was returned to him.³⁶ Marcion soon after left the city, only to build up a much larger following in the East and found a movement that survived for another century.

While this case illustrates that contradictory beliefs could coexist within Rome's Christian community, it also shows the limits of the resources available to its leaders for imposing doctrinal unity. Excommunication came to mean far more as a sanction in later centuries, but at this time its significance was more symbolic than practical. As the importance of the Eucharistic service grew, the various Christian groups would exchange weekly gifts of their consecrated bread and wine, as a sign of fellowship. In particular, the bishop sent them to all of the various house-churches that accepted his authority. So, excommunication meant that Eucharistic elements would no longer be sent to or received from the group thus being excluded. This was not yet a spiritual sanction that threatened supernatural or other punishment; the parties concerned just had nothing more to do with each other.

After Marcion, the best-known case of excommunication in Rome in the second century occurred during the years when Victor was bishop (c. 189 to c. 198). At the time there were two methods of calculating the date of Easter, the greatest feast of the Christian year. One used the Eastern method of calculation, by which it was held on the same day as the Jewish Passover, and the other used the practice followed in Rome of celebrating it on the Sunday immediately following that festival. Victor sent letters to the leaders of all the major communities, but with limited success. Finally, he excommunicated those in Rome who refused to give up the Eastern system. For this, he was rebuked by the Christians of Lyon for being too harsh, although their bishop, Irenaeus, had only recently been emphasising the importance of the apostolic authority of the Roman bishops.

Irenaeus' interest in establishing a somewhat unhistorical continuity in the Roman episcopate from the time of the Apostles was central to his opposition to the Gnostics, which was itself a reaction to a recent persecution in Lyon in 177, in which his predecessor as bishop and many of his fellow clergy in the city had been publicly executed, often in scenes of great cruelty. His anger against the Gnostic teachers was prompted by arguments they used to justify their evading persecution, even to the extent of denying their Christian beliefs. If, in their view, the real truths of Christianity were secret and did not belong to the literal word of the Scriptures or the performance of religious rituals, then what did it matter if you denied belief in such texts or involvement in such acts of worship? The sufferings of those who confessed their faith in public may have made it seem to non-Gnostics even more important that there be greater uniformity in belief. Why should they have to face imprisonment, torture and usually very painful deaths if some who professed to be fellow believers scoffed at them for being so literal minded and unnecessarily brave?

THE APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

The need for a recognised source of authority that could claim access to an authentic tradition of teaching going back to Jesus impelled Irenaeus and Tertullian to fix on episcopal succession as the key. Their claim was that the Apostles had founded a number of the major churches and appointed their first bishops or even been bishops themselves. In each case there had followed an unbroken succession of office holders, who passed on the authoritative teaching they had received from the founding Apostles, who themselves heard it from Jesus. This countered the claims of the Gnostic teachers to have inherited a secret teaching that traced back to Paul and others, for the Gnostics could not produce such complete and apparently well-attested lines of succession as those of the bishops of the major cities.

It was a clever argument that took on the various Gnostic teachers more or less on their own terms, and its authority survived unchallenged for centuries, even though in fact there had been no bishops before the early part of the second century. Rome was used by both

Irenaeus and Tertullian as their prime example not only because of the special significance in Christian history of both Peter and Paul but also because it was actually the only major see for which such a complete chain of episcopal succession could convincingly be constructed. We must assume that there were good records of early Christian office holders in Rome, even if they had not necessarily been bishops, from which it could be made. When around 325 Eusebius of Caesarea tried to draw up lists of holders of the office of bishop in the main Christian centres, including Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, his evidence was insufficient to permit it for any case other than that of Rome, on which he drew his early information from Irenaeus.

Another problem with Irenaeus and Tertullian's argument is that it assumes a role for the Apostles in the years after the Crucifixion that may not be entirely historical. The canonical gospels tell us of the Apostles' role in Christ's ministry and preaching, but these texts are not themselves the earliest evidence for Christianity. Paul's letters, dating from the 40s to the early 60s, do not refer to the Apostles as a body exercising leadership of the movement. From his remarks, it was Peter, John and James, the brother of Jesus, who were seen as leaders of the movement. Later James, known as 'the Just' and 'the Rampart of the people', who combined an asceticism reminiscent of that of an Old Testament prophet with absolute fidelity to Jewish ritual and dietary laws, became the predominant figure.³⁷ During a purge of Christians in Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish Revolt in AD 66, some orthodox Jews stoned him to death. His status was inherited by other members of the family, some of whom were apparently still alive in the reign of Domitian (81–96), but by this time any leadership of the movement had long since passed from their hands.³⁸

The early primacy of members of Jesus' family, together with the expectation of an imminent Second Coming, limited the need for institutional structures and authority. It is only after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 that the first Gospel, Mark's, was written, followed by those of Matthew and Luke within another ten to twenty years. It is in their narratives that the Apostles as a group first take on a special role in the revelation and spread of Christ's teaching. This

may reflect the growing sense that the End was not nigh and that Christian communities, some of which were now claiming special links with particular disciples, saw an apostolic transmission of Jesus' words as a source of direction and authority.

For example, a community of Christians is believed to have existed in western Anatolia (Asian Turkey) claiming a particular link with the Apostle John, in whose name a number of writings were produced in the late first and early second centuries. These included not just his Gospel but also the Book of Revelation and the two Epistles.³⁹ In the case of Peter, the First Epistle attributed to him but certainly not written by him, may well have been produced at Rome in the last decades of the first century, though this is not definitely established. If so, it is further evidence of the special relationship between the Prince of the Apostles and at least some of the Christian groups in the imperial capital. Interestingly, its theological views are essentially those of Paul.⁴⁰

While the history of these early years may seem too vague and inconclusive, with too few three-dimensional characters or clearly delineated events, and with all too much recourse to scholarly doubt, disagreement and lack of evidence, its importance is undeniable. Why and how links were forged between the apostolic founders and a line of successors which they were supposed to have instituted and through whom their teaching was uniquely transmitted—these questions mark the first step in our enquiry. This process laid the groundwork upon which the whole edifice of papal primacy would be erected in the centuries to come.