

St. Peter, originally a fisherman named Simon, was one of Jesus's twelve apostles and became a central figure in the founding of the early Christian Church. After Jesus's death and resurrection, Peter assumed a key leadership role, preaching boldly, performing miracles, and overseeing the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian community. He is traditionally regarded as the first pope by the Catholic Church

Life before discipleship

- **Original name and occupation:** Born Shimon bar Yonah (Simon, son of John) in Bethsaida, Peter was a Jewish fisherman who worked on the Sea of Galilee. His brother, Andrew, was also an apostle.
- **Married life:** He was a married man who lived with his wife and mother-in-law in Capernaum, where Jesus healed his mother-in-law.

Ministry with Jesus

- **Called by Jesus:** Jesus called Simon and his brother Andrew to leave their nets and become "fishers of men".
- **Receives a new name:** In a pivotal moment at Caesarea Philippi, Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus responded by renaming him *Cephas* (Aramaic for "rock") which translates to *Petros* (Greek) or Peter.
- **Part of the inner circle:** Peter, along with James and John, was one of Jesus's three closest disciples. He witnessed key events such as the Transfiguration and Jesus's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- **Walks on water:** Peter was the only disciple to step out of a boat and walk on water toward Jesus, but he began to sink when his faith wavered.
- **Moment of weakness:** Despite his loyalty, Peter infamously denied knowing Jesus three times after Jesus was arrested. Later, after his resurrection, Jesus lovingly restored Peter's mission by asking him three times, "Do you love me?".

Role in the early Church

- **Leading the Apostles:** After Jesus's ascension, Peter acted as a prominent leader and spokesperson for the apostles. He oversaw the selection of a replacement for Judas Iscariot and delivered the first Christian sermon on the day of Pentecost, resulting in thousands of baptisms.

- **Mission to the Gentiles:** Peter had a vision that led him to baptize the first Gentile converts, a significant step that opened the Church's mission beyond its Jewish roots.
- **Founding churches:** Church tradition holds that Peter became the first bishop of Antioch and, later, the first Bishop of Rome. He is also said to have worked alongside the Apostle Paul.
- **Conflict with Paul:** At one point, Peter and Paul came into conflict in Antioch over whether Jewish Christians should eat with Gentile Christians.

Martyrdom and legacy

- **Crucifixion in Rome:** According to tradition, Peter was martyred in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero, around 64–68 A.D..
- **Crucified upside down:** Feeling unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus, Peter reportedly requested to be crucified upside down.
- **Burial site:** He was buried on Vatican Hill, where St. Peter's Basilica was later built over his tomb.
- **Biblical writings:** The New Testament books of 1 and 2 Peter are attributed to him, though some modern scholars dispute his authorship. The Gospel of Mark is also traditionally thought to be based on Peter's preaching.

The most recognized symbols of St. Peter, the Apostle, are the keys to the kingdom of heaven, an upside-down cross, and a rooster. These images are rooted in biblical accounts and early Christian traditions about Peter's life and ministry.

The Keys to the Kingdom

- **Biblical origin:** This symbol comes from Matthew 16:19, where Jesus says to 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".
- **Papal authority:** As the figure to whom Jesus entrusted these keys, Peter is regarded by Catholics as the first pope. The two crossed keys, one gold and one silver, are the primary emblem of the papacy and the Holy See, representing the pope's spiritual and temporal authority.

The upside-down cross

- **Martyrdom in Rome:** Known as the Petrine Cross, this symbol derives from the tradition that Peter was martyred by crucifixion in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero.
- **Symbol of humility:** According to the 4th-century writer Jerome, Peter requested to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. For Christians, this represents his great humility.
- **Contrasting meaning:** In modern times, the inverted cross has also been co-opted by some anti-Christian and Satanic groups to express rebellion. However, within the historical Christian context, its meaning is one of honor and reverence for St. Peter's martyrdom.

The rooster

- **Peter's denial:** This symbol points to Peter's denial of Jesus, as predicted in the Gospels. Jesus foretold that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed, a prophecy that came true in the high priest's courtyard after Jesus's arrest.
- **Repentance and forgiveness:** While a symbol of Peter's weakness, the rooster is also a powerful symbol of repentance and resurrection. It represents the light of a new day and the forgiveness that Peter received after his betrayal.

The boat

- **A fisherman's past:** A boat or fishing net is often used to symbolize Peter's former life as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee.
- **The "Barque of St. Peter":** In Christian iconography, the Church is often compared to a ship sailing through the sea of a chaotic world. Because Peter was made the "rock" of the Church, this is known as the "Barque of St. Peter," with the popes as his successors steering the vessel.

The shepherd's staff

- **Pastoral authority:** Following his resurrection, Jesus entrusted Peter with the charge to "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep" (John 21:15-17), positioning him as the chief shepherd of the Christian flock. The shepherd's staff, or crook, represents this pastoral leadership.

Yes, there are several relics associated with St. Peter, with the most significant being the bones believed to be his, housed primarily in Rome. The Vatican officially declared the

discovery of what it considers his authentic remains in 1968, though their identity is debated by some. Other relics include his skull and the chains he was bound with in prison.

The bones of St. Peter

- **Discovery in the Vatican:** The relics considered to be St. Peter's most valuable were found during archaeological excavations under

St. Peter's Basilica

, which began in 1939. The dig, commissioned by Pope Pius XII, unearthed an ancient Roman necropolis directly beneath the basilica's main altar, a location historically associated with Peter's burial.

- **Identification of the remains:** During the 1960s, a team of archaeologists identified bone fragments belonging to a robust man who died in his 60s or 70s. Crucially, an ancient wall next to the bones had a Greek inscription that was deciphered as *Petros eni*, or "Peter is here".
- **Vatican's announcement:** In 1968, Pope Paul VI announced that the relics had been identified in a "convincing" manner. While most of the remains are enshrined in the niche where they were found, nine fragments were placed in a bronze reliquary and kept in the private papal chapel.
- **Gift to Orthodox Church:** In 2019, Pope Francis gave the bronze reliquary containing the bone fragments to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, as a gesture of goodwill and a step toward Christian unity.

The Chains of St. Peter

- **Miraculous freeing:** According to the biblical Book of Acts, St. Peter was miraculously freed from prison by an angel, causing his chains to fall off.
- **Fusion of chains:** An early Christian legend claims that when Empress Eudoxia gave the chains to Pope Leo I in the 5th century, they miraculously fused together with the chains Peter was said to have worn in Rome's Mamertine Prison.
- **Veneration in Rome:** These chains are a cherished relic housed under the altar of the Basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli ("St. Peter in Chains") in Rome.

The Skull of St. Peter

- **Separate relic:** The skull of St. Peter is claimed to be a separate relic from the bones interred at the Vatican.

- **Enshrined at**

St. John Lateran

: Since at least the 9th century, tradition has held that Peter's skull has been kept in the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran, alongside the skull of St. Paul.

Veneration and pilgrimage

These relics are central to the history and theology of the Catholic Church. The tomb, located directly under the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica, has been a significant pilgrimage site for centuries and is considered the spiritual heart of the Roman Catholic Church.