

When I first became pastor down in Champaign, Illinois another pastor told me that I was now “the key man.” I asked: “Is that because everything depends on me?” My fellow priest said: “Now don’t get too big headed! What I mean is people will be coming up to you at all different times to get into places at the parish because you have the keys to get in!”

Jesus makes an important point in the gospel about keys when He tells Peter: “*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.*” Our Protestant brothers and sisters do not believe that Jesus meant that Peter was “the key man” in the sense of having primacy, but the “keys of the kingdom” was Peter’s faith proclamation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

However, we all know that keys allow entry through gates or doors. And, the one who has the keys has some authority—he could open the door for you. We Catholics believe that Jesus did mean to single Peter out as “the key man.” Peter has primacy over the others. He is the leader.

To understand the royal symbolism of the keys given to Peter, we need to see how they were used in the Davidic kingdom of the Old Testament.

The key of the house of David symbolized the administrative authority of the “master of the palace”—the king’s highest ranking official in the royal court. Similar to prime minister-like positions in other ancient near-eastern kingdoms, the master of the palace in the Davidic dynasty shared in the king’s own authority, governed in the king’s name, and acted for him in his absence.

Isaiah 22 describes the promotion of a man named Eliakim to this most prestigious office. As master of the palace, Eliakim handled the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom for the king. He wore a royal robe and exercised authority, ruling as a father figure over the people of Judah. To symbolize the unique authority he held, he was given the key of the house of David.

This is the royal imagery Jesus was alluding to when He gave Peter the keys to the kingdom. Jesus was saying that Peter will be the new “master of the palace” in the kingdom He was building. Since the keys symbolized how the Davidic king vested the prime minister with his very authority, Jesus, in giving Peter the keys to the kingdom, was saying: “You, Peter, will be the prime minister in my kingdom. You will be vested with my very authority so that you can shepherd the people in my name.”

Jesus certainly singled out Peter for having a unique role in His kingdom. Peter underwent a name change signifying his special vocation. He was the foundation rock for the Church, keeping even the powers of evil at bay. And he was given the keys to the kingdom, designating him as the prime minister, ruling with Jesus’ authority in the Church.

What’s more, when Jesus gave Peter the keys, we believe He was entrusting His authority not only to Peter, but also to all his successors, right up to our current pope, Pope Francis. That’s why we honor and respect the Holy Father so greatly. So, let’s continue to pray for him and his intentions, for he’s got a big job being “the key man.”