

It was St. Irenaeus who first stated clearly the idea that “the Church had been ‘founded and organised at Rome by the two glorious apostles Peter and Paul’ and who then appointed successors beginning with ‘Linus, Anacletus, Clement, Evaristus, Alexander, Sixtus and so on down to Irenaeus’ contemporary and friend, Eleutherius, Bishop of Rome from AD 174-189’. Eamon Duffy then goes on to make it clear, in his turn, that this establishment of a line of Popes going back to Peter and Paul is not without its difficulties – more legend than fact – but still based on the importance of both Peter and Paul as founding figures in early Christian tradition, not least because of their martyrdom in Rome and their contrasting but complementary missions, one to the Jews of the diaspora and the other to the Gentiles of the Roman world. Without this dual mission, the Church may well have ended up as a minor cult in a minor country and we could well be worshipping Mithras or Mammon instead. What is interesting in their respective paths is how uncertain the particulars of each day’s journey were as this greater plan unfolded or came to fruition. The important point being that both men have to struggle both with opposition and themselves as they find their way forward. They have a vision of sorts to impart: for Peter, his personal experience of Christ as Saviour and the Resurrected One; and for Paul, the Risen Christ also, but not formed, one might say, in the flesh of the gospels. They both experience what we experience each day: the struggle to en flesh the faith we have: the belief that there is a way worked out for us in Christ but it consists of a series of steps which build on one another in a way that remains uncertain. It’s our living with this uncertainty which, I would suggest, is the true nature of faith and it is only in hindsight that we can get a glimpse, perhaps, of an overall plan and construct a line of Popes going all the way back to Peter and Paul.

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