

Question

Whether the clergy of the Catholic Church maintain apostolic succession, as they claim.

Objection 1.

It seems that apostolic succession does not exist. For if apostolic succession truly began with the apostles and continued by an unbroken chain of valid episcopal ordinations, then a ministry beginning with multiple apostles should not, after fifteen centuries, reduce to one bishop in the sixteenth century. But the overwhelming majority of today's Roman Catholic episcopal lineages trace back to Scipione Rebiba alone, whose own consecrator is not certainly known. Therefore the alleged succession appears to narrow from the apostles to one undocumented man after fifteen hundred years, and then expand again from that one man into nearly the whole modern Roman episcopate. This is historically implausible and impossible to verify. Therefore the Catholic claim to apostolic succession collapses.

Objection 2.

Further, the problem is not merely that Rebiba's own consecrator is unknown. Even the men sometimes proposed as possible consecrators for Rebiba cannot themselves be traced back through a continuous chain of known consecrators. If one asks, "Who consecrated Rebiba?" the answer is uncertain; if one then asks, "Who consecrated the man who may have consecrated Rebiba?" the answer again becomes uncertain. Thus, any attempt to connect Rebiba to the apostles quickly dissolves into speculation, gaps, and fragmented historical records. There is no continuous ordination tree, nor anything close to one, linking Rebiba back to the apostolic age. Therefore apostolic succession, cannot be verified and should not be accepted as a real historical chain.

Objection 3.

Further, a mere list of bishops would not prove apostolic succession. For succession would require valid ordinations and lawful successors, not simply men who managed to hold powerful church offices. But many historical bishops were wicked, corrupt, or raised to office through politics and ambition. Therefore, even if Catholics could show a visible line of bishops, they have not thereby proven that those men were true and lawful successors of the apostles.

Objection 4.

Further, even if a historical line of ordinations from the apostles to the present could be shown, this would not prove that those who possess such succession remained faithful to apostolic doctrine. For a minister may receive an office and yet abuse it, corrupt it, or depart from the truth. Therefore, apostolic

succession by itself cannot establish that the Catholic Church teaches with divine authority, since an outward succession of office does not prove they stayed true to what the apostles actually taught.

Objection 5.

Further, apostolic succession should be rejected because it is not biblical. For Scripture, when properly defined, is the authority for the Church; but Scripture nowhere binds Christians to submit to a continuing line of ordained church authority from the apostles to the present. Therefore, even if such a succession of ordinations existed, it would not matter unless that authority were first proven from Scripture.

On the contrary,

The apostles themselves established a ministry that continued beyond their personal presence: St. Matthias was chosen to take Judas's office; St. Paul commanded St. Timothy to entrust apostolic teaching to faithful men able to teach others; and St. Titus was left to appoint presbyters in every town. Nor was this understood by the early Church as a later invention, for St. Clement of Rome says that the apostles appointed ministers and provided for successors after their death, and St. Irenaeus appeals to the succession of bishops from the apostles as a public answer to heresy.

Therefore, apostolic succession cannot be dismissed as a sixteenth-century genealogical fiction, a medieval power-grab, or an unbiblical novelty. For the biblical pattern of appointed ministry, together with the earliest post-apostolic testimony, gives positive reason to believe that apostolic ministry was publicly continued in the Church. Thus the question is not whether succession has "zero" historical probability, but whether one will accept the plain force of the biblical and historical evidence, which consistently testifies to the continuation of apostolic ministry from the earliest days of the Church.

A distinction must therefore be made. Apostolic succession is ordered toward apostolic teaching, but a bare historical chain of ordinations, considered apart from full communion and fidelity to the apostolic faith, does not by itself guarantee the fullness of apostolic doctrine. Yet neither does the fullness of apostolic doctrine arise apart from the apostolic ministry established to preserve and transmit it. Just as an heir may truly receive an inheritance and yet misuse it, so a successor may truly receive an office and yet abuse it. Abuse of an office does not prove the office was never transmitted, nor does the corruption of some heirs abolish the inheritance itself.

Responses:

Reply to Objection 1

To the first objection, it must be said that the argument confuses a documentary bottleneck with a sacramental bottleneck. The objection assumes that because the most common surviving records of modern Roman episcopal lineage presently converge at Archbishop Scipione Rebiba, apostolic succession must have effectively narrowed to a single bishop from whom later bishops were derived. But this conclusion, in light of historical evidence, is not logical. The convergence of many recorded lineages upon Rebiba reflects the present state of the surviving genealogical records, not the actual reduction of the Church's episcopate to one man. That is a limitation in our ability to trace one dominant recorded lineage further back with certainty; it is not proof that all other episcopal lines ceased to exist, that apostolic succession collapsed, or that the episcopate was reduced in reality to one man.

The historical setting itself disproves the idea that the episcopate had literally narrowed to Rebiba alone. Rebiba was consecrated in 1541, during a period when the Catholic Church still had hundreds of diocesan and equivalent sees throughout the world. When all types of bishops serving in the Church are counted, including residential bishops, auxiliaries, coadjutors, titular bishops, curial bishops, and bishops who had resigned or no longer governed a residential see, the number of living Catholic bishops in that era was likely in the hundreds, and perhaps around nine hundred worldwide. The Council of Trent, which met from the years 1545 to 1563, gives a concrete illustration of this. Across its sessions, hundreds of bishops were recorded as participating, with about 235 unique bishops attending at various points. Therefore, the Church of Rebiba's own generation plainly did not consist of one isolated bishop from whom the episcopate had to be recreated.

Indeed, the records immediately surrounding Rebiba's own consecration confirm this. In the years 1541 through 1550, Catholic-Hierarchy lists 117 episcopal consecrations. None of these consecrations lists Rebiba as principal consecrator. This is not what one would expect if apostolic succession had actually funneled into one man in the sixteenth century and then had to be rebuilt from him. One hundred and seventeen recorded episcopal consecrations apart from Rebiba is not zero. It is evidence that many bishops were still being consecrated through other lines during the very decade in which Rebiba himself became a bishop. Therefore, the later dominance of the Rebiban line cannot mean that the episcopate had literally collapsed into Rebiba. It can only mean that one later recorded branch eventually became genealogically dominant.

The same point is confirmed if one looks only at the specific years in which Rebiba himself is known to have consecrated bishops. Rebiba is recorded as consecrating bishops in the years 1544, 1566, 1567, 1568, 1569, 1570, 1571, and 1574. Across those same years, the records show about 175 total episcopal consecrations: roughly 26 involving Rebiba and about 149 without him. Therefore, even in the very years when Rebiba was active as a consecrator, the episcopate was plainly not being derived from him alone. The records show many bishops being consecrated apart from him. Thus, the later dominance of the Rebiban line cannot be explained as though the Church had no other functioning episcopal lines in his own lifetime.

This distinction exposes the central defect in the objection. The convergence of most modern recorded episcopal lineages upon Rebiba does not entail that he was the only bishop of his age, the only valid bishop of his age, or the sole surviving conduit of apostolic succession. The records show the opposite. They show many bishops existing, many bishops being consecrated, and many episcopal lines functioning apart from Rebiba. What later converged upon Rebiba was not the whole reality of apostolic succession, but the most common surviving Roman genealogical line.

Nor does the later dominance of the Rebiban line prove fabrication. Rebiba himself is documented as principal consecrator of only about twenty-three bishops. His historical importance comes largely from the fact that one of those bishops, Giulio Antonio Santorio, became the gateway into a powerful Roman curial episcopal line. That line later passed to Pope Benedict XIII, whose unusually large number of personal episcopal consecrations made the Rebiban line dominant in the Roman rite. Rather, the later expansion of the Rebiban line is best explained by the historical influence of that particular branch and the unusually large number of bishops consecrated within it over subsequent generations. It is evidence that one Roman episcopal branch became exceptionally influential in later consecration records.

The objection also places unwarranted weight on the fact that the name of Rebiba's consecrator is not presently known. It assumes that unless the identity of the consecrating bishop can be verified, the consecration itself becomes doubtful. But this is not logical. The absence of a surviving name in the historical record is not evidence that no consecration occurred, nor is it evidence that the consecration was invalid. Historical realities do not cease to exist merely because later generations cannot reconstruct every step of the documentary trail. If a genealogist traces a family tree back to an ancestor whose parents cannot be identified from surviving records, it does not follow that the ancestor had no parents or that the family began with him. It means only that the records have reached their present limit. In the same way, the question concerning Rebiba is not whether he was publicly recognized as a bishop, but why the name of his consecrating bishop has not survived with certainty in the presently known records. That is a gap in genealogical documentation, not proof of sacramental invalidity.

Indeed, the known facts point in the opposite direction. Scipione Rebiba was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Chieti and Titular Bishop of Amyclae and is recorded as having been ordained bishop on May 14, 1541. He was later made Bishop of Mottola, elevated to cardinal, appointed to other episcopal offices, and participated in three papal conclaves. He lived and functioned during the age of the Council of Trent and during the period of the Roman Inquisition. At his death in 1577, he was Prefect of the Office of the Holy Inquisition, and his memorial described him as an inquisitor against heretical depravity. This is not the profile of a man whose episcopal status was obscure, secret, or doubtful to his contemporaries.

Therefore, the burden of proof falls decisively upon the objector. If Rebiba's consecration were invalid, irregular, or even seriously doubtful, one would expect some trace of controversy among his contemporaries. Yet Rebiba lived and rose to prominence during one of the most scrutinized and doctrinally vigilant periods in Catholic history. He held public episcopal offices, was elevated to the cardinalate, participated in papal conclaves, and ultimately served as Prefect of the Holy Office itself, the very institution charged with investigating doctrinal and ecclesiastical irregularities. It defies common sense to suppose that a man whose episcopal status was genuinely doubtful could have advanced through such offices without challenge, inquiry, or objection. Yet the objection produces no

contemporary accusation, investigation, protest, or evidence of doubt regarding the validity of his consecration. Instead, it rests entirely upon a much weaker claim: that modern historians cannot presently identify the name of the bishop who consecrated him. But the absence of a surviving name in later records is not evidence that the consecration never occurred, much less that it was invalid.

This is significant because episcopal consecrations are not secret or merely private claims. They are public acts of the Church, performed according to recognized rites, before clergy and witnesses, and followed by public recognition of the man as a bishop. Therefore, the relevant fact is not only whether later historians can name Rebiba's consecrator, but whether the Church of his own day publicly received and treated him as a bishop. On that point, the evidence is clear: Rebiba functioned publicly as a bishop without contemporary challenge to the validity of his consecration.

Nor does the objection undermine the historical antiquity of apostolic succession. The idea of succession from the apostles is attested long before Rebiba and was not merely an early Christian belief that later disappeared. St. Clement of Rome says the apostles appointed ministers and gave instructions that other approved men should succeed them after death, and St. Irenaeus says the churches could reckon the bishops instituted by the apostles and the succession of those men down to his own time. The same principle continued to be affirmed throughout Christian history. Medieval canonists, theologians, and ecclesiastical writers regularly spoke of bishops as succeeding the apostles in their offices, and episcopal succession remained a recognized feature of Christian ecclesiastical thought, canon law, and church governance throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation era. Thus, whatever difficulty Rebiba presents for modern lineage charts, he cannot explain a belief in apostolic succession that was already present in the earliest Church and continuously attested throughout the centuries leading up to his own lifetime.

Thus Objection 1 proves only this: modern researchers cannot presently reconstruct the most common Roman episcopal lineage prior to Rebiba by naming every consecrator. It does not prove that Rebiba was not consecrated, that his consecration was invalid, that all prior apostolic lines disappeared, or that apostolic succession was invented in his time. A dominant recorded line is not the same thing as an invented line, and a genealogical bottleneck is not the same thing as a sacramental break.

Reply to Objection 2

To the second objection, it must be said that this argument imposes a modern genealogical standard upon ancient Christian history. It assumes that apostolic succession can be accepted only if one can produce a complete surviving ordination tree naming every consecrator from the apostles to Rebiba. But this is not how historical continuity from antiquity is ordinarily known, nor is it how the Church herself understood or preserved apostolic succession.

Apostolic succession is not merely a chain of names preserved for the scrutiny of modern genealogists. It is a public ecclesiastical reality. Bishops were not secret figures claiming invisible authority. They were appointed to sees, consecrated by other bishops, received by local churches, listed in episcopal catalogues, summoned to councils, named in ecclesiastical correspondence, judged by canon law, commemorated liturgically, and recognized by other bishops in communion with them. Therefore, even

when the name of a particular consecrator is lost, the public reality of the episcopal office is not thereby erased.

This also answers the objection, “What if I claimed succession?” A private claimant does not stand in the same position as a public episcopal body historically received and recognized in the Church. Apostolic succession is not verified by a man’s bare assertion that he possesses it, but by the public ecclesiastical realities surrounding the office: appointment, ordination, possession of a see, communion with other bishops, recognition by the Church, participation in councils, and continuity within the Church’s sacramental and canonical life. Therefore, the question is not whether an isolated individual can claim an invisible chain for himself, but whether the historical record shows a public episcopal ministry existing, functioning, and being recognized through time.

This distinction is illustrated even in the sixteenth-century records themselves. The records may preserve that a man was appointed bishop, ordained bishop, held a see, attended councils, governed a diocese, or was recognized in ecclesiastical office, even when they do not preserve enough information for modern researchers to reconstruct every prior consecrator in an unbroken chart. Thus the historical record may be sufficient to establish that bishops existed, were consecrated, and functioned publicly in the Church, even when it is insufficient to satisfy a modern demand for a complete consecrator-by-consecrator genealogy.

The objection therefore mistakes incomplete documentary reconstruction for historical nonexistence. It is one thing to say that modern researchers cannot presently name every consecrator in a continuous line from Rebiba back to the apostles. It is another thing entirely to conclude that apostolic succession is non-existent because it can not be historically reconstructed and verified to their likings. Such a conclusion is illogical.

Nor is it surprising that many individual consecration records are missing. The Church passed through persecution, war, fire, decay, revolutions, fragile record-keeping, destroyed documents, and centuries before modern record keeping. One should not expect the record of every episcopal consecration from antiquity and the Middle Ages to survive in a neat documentary chain. The absence of a complete paper trail is exactly what one would expect from pre-modern history. It is not evidence that the Church invented succession after the fact.

Therefore, the lack of a complete consecrator-by-consecrator chart from Rebiba back to the apostles does not disprove apostolic succession. *It proves only that modern researchers cannot reconstruct every link in one later Roman genealogical line with modern precision.* But apostolic succession rests upon a broader and older foundation: the public continuation of episcopal office, lawful ordination, apostolic sees, ecclesiastical recognition, and the continuous testimony of the Church from the apostolic age onward.

Thus Objection 2 fails because it treats “not fully reconstructible by surviving modern records” as though it meant “not historically real.” But the former does not mean the latter. The absence of a surviving marriage record in a family tree does not prove that no marriage occurred; it proves only that the surviving record is incomplete. So also a broken paper trail is not the same thing as a broken succession; missing documents are not the same thing as missing bishops; and the inability to name every consecrator is not proof that the apostolic ministry does not exist.

Reply to Objection 3

To the third objection, it must be said that the argument rightly condemns corruption in church office, but wrongly concludes that corruption automatically destroys the office itself. Scripture gives moral qualifications for ministers, and a bishop who is greedy, violent, ambitious, heretical, or scandalous is gravely guilty and may be removed from office. But unworthiness is not the same thing as nonexistence of office.

The objection assumes that grave sin destroys ecclesiastical office, or at least makes a minister incapable of validly transmitting that office to another. But this is precisely the principle that must be proven, not assumed. Scripture gives qualifications for ministers and condemns corrupt officeholders, but it does not teach that every grave sinner automatically ceases to hold office or that every act performed through him becomes void. To claim that a bishop's moral failure automatically invalidates the consecrations he performs is not a historical argument against succession; it is the Donatist principle applied to apostolic succession.

Nor does the wickedness of certain officeholders make orderly consecrations historically improbable. This objection assumes that a corrupt man would not care enough about God, the Church, or the dignity of office to follow the required rite. But sacramental validity does not depend upon the personal devotion of the minister. A wicked bishop may lack holiness and still outwardly perform a public ecclesiastical rite according to its required form. Indeed, corrupt men often have strong worldly reasons to preserve outward order: public recognition, legal legitimacy, ecclesiastical acceptance, political stability, and the appearance of lawful authority. Therefore, the sins of a consecrating bishop do not make it historically improbable that he followed the external rite of consecration.

For this reason, Scripture's qualifications for bishops must therefore be understood according to their purpose. They are real standards by which the Church is to test, appoint, correct, and, when necessary, remove ministers. They are **not** presented as automatic validity switches by which every later sin erases office or invalidates all acts performed through that office. St. Paul tells Sts. Timothy and Titus what sort of men should be appointed; he does not say that every minister who later fails in one of these areas automatically ceases to hold office or loses all power to act.

Nor does the existence of bad ministers prove the Protestant conclusion that each believer must become his own final judge of doctrine. Diotrephes is a useful example. He loved preeminence, rejected St. John's authority, and mistreated the brethren. But St. John does not answer Diotrephes by dissolving church authority into private interpretation. Rather, he exercises apostolic judgment over him: "if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth." Thus Diotrephes proves that wicked men can abuse authority; he does not prove that authority itself is false, or that the remedy for corrupt leadership is private judgment detached from apostolic authority.

Scripture itself distinguishes between a man's wickedness and the reality of the office he occupies. The sons of Eli were wicked priests, yet their sin was condemned as an abuse of the priesthood, not as proof that their office as priests had ceased to exist. Caiaphas was a corrupt high priest involved in the condemnation of Christ, yet St. John still speaks of him as "high priest that year." Our Lord says that the scribes and Pharisees "sit on Moses' seat," and therefore the people should observe what they teach,

though not imitate their works. Thus Scripture does not teach that hypocrisy, corruption, or grave sin automatically removes one from a public religious office.

Nor does the objection gain force by imagining that corrupt rulers may change laws, manipulate procedures, or abuse the structures of ecclesiastical office. Such things may happen in human government, and Catholics do not deny that wicked churchmen have, at times, abused ecclesiastical power. But abuse of law is not the same thing as destruction of sacramental validity. A bishop may be badly chosen, unlawfully promoted, politically favored, or personally corrupt, and yet still be validly consecrated when the sacramental essentials are present. Likewise, a ruler may alter disciplinary rules concerning appointments, permissions, penalties, or procedures without thereby abolishing episcopal consecration itself. To prove a break in apostolic succession, one must show not merely that corrupt men held power or changed rules, but that the Church's episcopal consecrations ceased to contain what is necessary for the sacrament itself.

This is why the argument cannot rest on suspicion. It is not enough to say, "A wicked man might have changed the rules." *One must identify the change, show that it touched the essence of episcopal consecration, and show that subsequent consecrations were therefore invalid.* Otherwise the argument proves only that corrupt men may abuse office, which Catholics already admit. It does not prove that apostolic succession ended.

At the root then, this objection is the Donatist error in another form. The Donatists argued that the validity of Christ's sacraments depended upon the worthiness of the minister who administered them. St. Augustine answered that the sacraments belong to Christ, not to the minister. Therefore, an unworthy minister does not make Christ's gift unholy, void, or powerless. The minister may sin gravely in exercising his office; he may abuse what he has received; he may deserve judgment, discipline, or removal. But his sin does not make Christ's ministry cease to be Christ's ministry, nor does it nullify what Christ gives through the office.

Therefore, a distinction must be made between **valid office**, **lawful exercise**, and **personal holiness**. These should belong together, but they are not all identical. A man may hold a real office and exercise it wickedly. A minister may be truly ordained and yet personally unworthy. His personal sin makes him guilty before God, may justify discipline, and may even require removal from office; but sin by itself does not prove that he was never ordained, never held office, could not transmit office to another or automatically lost the office.

If this principle were true, Christian certainty would become impossible. One hidden hypocrite, one secret mortal sinner, or one corrupt minister anywhere in the chain could throw everything after him into doubt. No one could know whether a ministry was valid unless he could first inspect the soul and conduct of every man in the line.

The same logic would also turn against the biblical canon. If public religious authority becomes unreliable whenever sinful men are involved, then one would also need to audit the moral character of every bishop, presbyter, scribe, and witness involved in preserving, copying, receiving, and identifying the books of Scripture. But Christians do not accept the canon because every historical witness was sinless. They accept it because God can preserve truth through the public testimony of His Church, even when some of the men involved are personally sinful.

Thus Objection 3 proves only that there have been wicked and corrupt men in church offices. Catholics do not deny this. But it does not prove that those men lacked real office, that their ordinations were invalid, or that apostolic succession was broken. A sinful man may abuse an office; but the abuse does not, by itself, make the office void or cause an automatic loss of office.

Reply to Objection 4.

To the fourth objection, it must be said that the objection correctly observes that a minister may receive an office and yet abuse it, corrupt it, or depart from the truth. Scripture itself records examples of men who held genuine authority and nevertheless acted unfaithfully. The Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession has never denied this possibility. The existence of an office does not guarantee the personal holiness, wisdom, or orthodoxy of every individual who occupies it.

However, this observation does not refute apostolic succession. At most, it shows that succession alone is not a guarantee that every successor will faithfully discharge his office. The question is not whether individual ministers can fail, but whether Christ established a continuing apostolic ministry through which His Church would ordinarily teach, govern, and sanctify His people. A bishop who abuses his office does not cease to hold the office; rather, he fails in the duties attached to it. In the same way, the possibility of corruption does not negate the reality of succession any more than the existence of unjust judges negates the reality of judicial office.

The objection is also partly correct in saying that a historical line of ordinations, considered by itself and in isolation, does not prove full fidelity to apostolic doctrine. The Catholic Church does not teach that every bishop who possesses valid succession is therefore personally orthodox, morally faithful, or fully united to the whole Church. Nor does she teach that every separated body with valid apostolic succession thereby possesses the fullness of Catholic doctrine and communion.

Therefore, apostolic succession must not be reduced to a naked genealogy. It is a real and necessary element of apostolic continuity, but it is not meant to stand alone as though ordination lineage by itself settles every question of doctrine. Apostolic succession belongs within the fuller reality of the Church: apostolic teaching, valid ministry, sacramental worship, visible communion, and unity with the apostolic college under its head.

Nor does apostolic succession require the faith to have been handed on by a line of personally holy popes. The Catholic claim is not that every pope governed well, lived virtuously, or handed on the faith without scandal. Rather, the claim is that the apostolic faith is preserved in the Church despite the sins and failures of particular officeholders. Therefore, the sins of particular popes may prove corruption in office, but they do not prove the extinction of apostolic faith.

Thus, the existence of valid succession in a separated church does not disprove the Catholic doctrine of succession. Rather, it confirms the Catholic distinction between valid ministry and full Catholic communion. A bishop may possess valid orders and yet be separated from full communion; a church may retain real apostolic succession and yet lack the fullness of Catholic unity. This is why the Catholic Church can recognize valid Eastern Orthodox orders without thereby saying that Eastern Orthodoxy possesses the fullness of Catholic doctrine or ecclesial authority.

The objection therefore fails only when it concludes that, because some ministers abuse their office, the office itself is meaningless, or because succession alone does not prove everything, succession proves nothing. Neither conclusion is correct. **A historical line of ordinations does not, by itself, prove complete doctrinal fidelity; but neither is it irrelevant.** It remains the visible means by which apostolic ministry is transmitted. Without succession, one does not have the apostolic ministry in its ordained fullness; with succession separated from full communion, one has a real but wounded participation in that ministry.

Therefore, apostolic succession is not a magical guarantee that every successor, or every separated body retaining succession, remains fully faithful in all doctrine. But neither is it a meaningless external chain. **It is a necessary component of apostolic continuity, ordered toward the preservation of apostolic doctrine within the visible unity of the Church.** The existence of unfaithful or separated successors shows that succession can be abused, wounded, or misused; it does not show that succession is nonexistent, irrelevant, or unbiblical.

Reply to Objection 5.

To the fifth objection, it must be said that Scripture does not present Church authority as a matter of private interpretation alone, but as a visible ministry established, appointed, and continued in the Church. Therefore, **the claim that Scripture nowhere binds Christians to submit to ordained church authority is contrary to Scripture itself.**

First, Scripture teaches that Christ founded a visible Church with real authority. Our Lord says to St. Peter, “I will build my church,” and gives him the keys of the kingdom, with authority to bind and loose. He later gives binding and loosing authority to the apostles more broadly, and commands that disputes be brought to the Church: “if he will not hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” **Therefore, Scripture does not present the Church as an invisible collection of private interpreters, but as a visible body with authority to judge, bind, loose, and be heard.**

Second, Scripture teaches that apostolic ministry is an office, not merely a temporary personal gift. After Judas fell, St. Peter says, “his bishoprick let another take,” and St. Matthias is numbered with the eleven apostles. The point is not that every apostle would have identical successors in every respect, but that apostolic ministry is described as an office capable of being filled when vacant. This directly contradicts the idea that apostolic authority was merely personal and non-transferable.

Third, Scripture shows ordained ministers being appointed in the churches. Sts. Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church. St. Paul left St. Titus in Crete to ordain elders in every city. St. Timothy is warned, “lay hands suddenly on no man,” showing that entry into ministry was not self-assumed, but conferred through a serious public act and not bestowed rashly. These texts give the biblical pattern: the Church does not recognize self-appointed teachers; ministers are appointed and ordained by those already entrusted with authority. This agrees with St. Paul’s principle in Romans: “How shall they preach unless they be sent?” **The apostolic pattern is not that any man may simply claim authority to preach, teach, and rule in Christ’s name.** Rather, those who exercise ministry in the Church are sent, appointed, and entrusted with their office through the established means Christ and

the apostles provided, and the laying on of hands is not to be done rashly. Scripture therefore joins preaching to mission, and mission to being sent by legitimate authority.

Fourth, Scripture commands submission to real church rulers. Hebrews says, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls.” St. Paul tells the Thessalonians to know those who “are over you in the Lord, and admonish you.” Therefore, the claim that Scripture nowhere binds Christians to submit to continuing ordained church authority is false. Scripture explicitly speaks of rulers in the Church, men over the faithful in the Lord, who watch for souls and to whom obedience is owed.

Fifth, Scripture commands the guarded transmission of apostolic doctrine beyond the first generation. St. Paul tells St. Timothy, “the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” This is not merely a command for Christians to share biblical ideas. St. Timothy is an ordained apostolic delegate who received authority through the laying on of hands, is charged to guard the deposit of faith, rebuke error, appoint and test ministers, and commit apostolic doctrine to faithful men who will teach others after him. Thus 2 Timothy 2:2 shows not only teaching after the apostles, but authorized transmission of apostolic teaching through approved ministers.

Sixth, Scripture identifies the Church, *not the private interpreter*, as the public guardian of truth. St. Paul calls the Church “the pillar and ground of the truth.” He commands St. Timothy to guard the deposit entrusted to him. St. Jude speaks of “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” These texts show that apostolic truth is publicly delivered, guarded, and handed on – not rediscovered by each generation through private interpretation.

Therefore, apostolic succession is biblical in substance. Scripture gives the Church; the keys; binding and loosing; the command to hear the Church; apostolic office; appointment by authority; laying on of hands; ordained elders; rulers over the faithful; obedience to those rulers; the guarding of the deposit of faith; and the transmission of apostolic doctrine to faithful men able to teach others. **Catholic apostolic succession is not foreign to Scripture, but the doctrinal name for this biblical pattern of continuing apostolic ministry.**

The phrase “*Scripture is the authority when properly defined*” also reveals the weakness of the objection. If “properly defined” means “properly interpreted,” then one must ask **who has the authority to determine the proper interpretation?** Scripture itself does not answer this by making each believer his own final judge. *Rather, Scripture points to a visible Church with appointed ministers, real rulers, authoritative teaching, and public judgment.* Thus the biblical answer is not Scripture against Church authority, but Scripture within the apostolic Church that Christ founded.

Appendix: Biblical, Historical and Probabilistic Evidence for Apostolic Succession

This appendix gathers the biblical, historical, and probabilistic evidence relevant to the question of apostolic succession. It is not offered as a modern “full ordination tree” naming every bishop and consecrator from the apostles to the present. Rather, it shows that the Catholic claim rests upon a broad cumulative case: Scripture’s pattern of appointed ministry, the early Church’s public memory of succession, the episcopal structure witnessed immediately after the apostolic age, and the absence of evidence for a later invention.

I. Biblical Data

Scripture does not provide a modern genealogical chart of ordinations, but it does provide the essential structure of apostolic succession.

1. **Apostolic office could be filled when vacant.**

In Acts 1, Judas’s place is treated as an office capable of being filled: “his bishoprick let another take.” St. Matthias is then numbered with the eleven apostles. This shows that apostolic ministry was not treated merely as a private charisma that vanished with the individual man.

2. **Ministers were appointed in the churches.**

The seven deacons, including St. Stephen, were appointed to the diaconate by the Apostles when they “imposed hands upon them” (Acts 6:6). Sts. Paul and Barnabas “ordained them elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). St. Paul left St. Titus in Crete to “ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). St. Timothy was ordained with the “imposition of the hands of the priesthood” (1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 1:6) and is warned to “lay hands suddenly on no man” (1 Timothy 5:22). These texts show a visible ministry conferred by those already entrusted with authority.

3. **Preachers must be sent.**

St. Paul asks, “How shall they preach, unless they be sent?” (Romans 10:15). This establishes a biblical principle relevant to apostolic succession: public preaching in Christ’s name is not self-authorized. The Church’s ministers are appointed, entrusted with doctrine and commissioned; they do not merely arise by private claim.

4. **The faithful were commanded to obey church rulers.**

Hebrews commands: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls” (Hebrews 13:17). St. Paul also speaks of those who “are over you in the Lord, and admonish you” (1 Thessalonians 5:12). Scripture therefore does not present the Church as a body without real governing authority.

5. **Apostolic teaching was to be handed on through approved ministers.**

St. Paul commands St. Timothy: “the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). This is not merely a Wednesday night Bible study session. St. Timothy is an apostolic delegate who received authority through laying on of hands, was charged to guard the deposit, rebuke error, and appoint or test ministers.

6. **The Church is described as the public guardian of truth.**

St. Paul calls the Church “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). St. Jude speaks of “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). The New Testament pattern is therefore one of public delivery, guarding, and transmission of apostolic doctrine.

II. Early Patristic Witness

The earliest post-apostolic writers do not speak as though succession were a late invention. They speak as though the apostles appointed ministers, provided for succession, and left the churches with bishops, presbyters, and deacons.

1. St. Clement of Rome, late first century

St. Clement says that the apostles appointed ministers in the churches: “they appointed the first-fruits [of their labours]... to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe” (1 *Clement* 42). He also says that the apostles, foreseeing disputes concerning the episcopal office, “appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry” (1 *Clement* 44). This is especially important because St. Clement writes from Rome within living memory of the apostles.

2. St. Ignatius of Antioch, early second century

St. Ignatius repeatedly witnesses to a structured Church with bishop, presbytery, and deacons. Writing to the Smyrnaeans, he states: “See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.1). In the same chapter he writes: “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (*Smyrnaeans* 8.2). He further teaches: “Let no man do anything connected with the Church without a bishop.” (*Smyrnaeans* 8.1). Likewise, in his letter to the Trallians he exhorts Christians to “be subject to the bishop as to the Lord” (*Letter to the Trallians* 2.1). In his letter to the Magnesians he goes even further, stating that “your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with your deacons [...] and are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ” (*Letter to the Magnesians* 6.1). These passages show that episcopal authority was already central to Church life very early in the second century and that the bishop, presbyters, and deacons were understood to occupy a ministerial structure reflecting and continuing the apostolic order.

3. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, second century

St. Irenaeus explicitly appeals to apostolic succession against heresy. In *Against Heresies* he writes: “we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times” (*Against Heresies* 3.3.1). He then proceeds to give the succession of the bishops of Rome from the apostles Sts. Peter and Paul down to his own day, arguing that “by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us” (*Against Heresies* 3.3.3). This is direct evidence that succession from the apostles was not a post-history fabrication, but a second-century public argument against doctrinal innovators.

4. **Tertullian, late second and early third century**

Tertullian likewise appeals to apostolic succession as a test of doctrinal authenticity. Challenging heretics in *The Prescription Against Heretics*, he writes: “Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning, in such a manner that [their] first bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 32). He then points to the apostolic churches as public witnesses of the true faith, noting that the Church of Rome traces its bishops through those appointed by the apostles. Tertullian's argument is significant because he assumes succession is a known and accepted criterion by which competing doctrinal claims may be judged. His testimony demonstrates that appeals to apostolic succession were already established well before the fourth century and were used as a public argument against theological innovation.

5. **St. Firmilian of Caesarea, mid-third century**

In his letter to St. Cyprian concerning the controversy over baptism, St. Firmilian explicitly connects episcopal authority with succession from the apostles. He writes: “Therefore the power of remitting sins was given to the apostles, and to the churches which they, sent by Christ, established, and to the bishops who succeeded to them by vicarious ordination” (*Letter to Cyprian* 75.16). This testimony is especially significant because St. Firmilian was writing in the midst of a dispute with Pope Stephen and was not attempting to defend later Roman claims. Nevertheless, he assumes as common Christian doctrine that bishops succeed the apostles through ordination and inherit authority connected with the apostolic ministry. His statement provides direct third-century evidence that episcopal succession was understood not merely as historical continuity, but as the continuation of apostolic authority within the Church.

6. **St. Cyprian of Carthage, mid-third century**

St. Cyprian repeatedly grounds ecclesiastical authority in the unity and continuity of the episcopate. In *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, he writes: “The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole.” He also insists that one cannot have God for his Father while refusing the Church as his Mother. Yet St. Cyprian is even more explicit in his letter *To Magnus*. Contrasting Cornelius with Novatian, he says that Cornelius “succeeded the bishop Fabian by lawful ordination,” whereas Novatian “can [not] be reckoned as a bishop” because he “succeed[ed] to no one” and “sprang from himself.” St. Cyprian then adds: “For he who has not been ordained in the Church can neither have nor hold to the Church in any way” (*Epistle* 75.3). St. Cyprian's testimony is important because he does not appeal to private interpretation or self-claimed authority, but to lawful ordination, succession, and communion within the one Church. This demonstrates that even in the mid-third century, episcopal succession was not a late invention but a practical and widely recognized principle of ecclesial legitimacy.

7. **Eusebius of Caesarea, early fourth century**

Eusebius, often called the “Father of Church History,” records earlier Christian testimony concerning the continuity of apostolic doctrine through episcopal succession. Quoting St. Hegesippus in *Ecclesiastical History* 4.22, he writes: “In every succession and in every city

there is a continuance of that which is proclaimed by the Law and the Prophets and the Lord.” The significance of this statement is that St. Hegesippus, a second-century Christian writer, connects doctrinal continuity with the successions of the churches. Eusebius preserves this testimony as part of his broader effort to trace the succession of bishops in the principal sees from the apostolic age onward. Thus, by the early fourth century, the historical memory of episcopal succession was not presented as a recent innovation but as an established feature of the Church's understanding of its continuity with the apostles.

8. St. Jerome, late fourth and early fifth century

St. Jerome also speaks of the Church's ordained ministers as successors of the apostles. In his letter to Heliodorus, he writes: “Far be it from me to censure the successors of the apostles, who with holy words consecrate the body of Christ, and who make us Christians. Having the keys of the kingdom of heaven, they judge men to some extent before the day of judgment, and guard the chastity of the bride of Christ” (*Letter* 14.8). This is significant because Jerome does not treat the ministry of bishops and priests as a self-appointed teaching function or a merely human office. He connects it with the apostolic succession, the Eucharist, the keys of the kingdom, ecclesial judgment, and guardianship of the Church. Elsewhere, in *Letter* 146, he says that “bishops, presbyters and deacons occupy in the church the same positions as those which were occupied by Aaron, his sons, and the Levites in the temple,” and adds that bishops, whether in great cities or small places, are “successors of the apostles.” Jerome therefore witnesses to an ordained ministry understood as apostolic, sacramental, and ecclesial in character.

9. St. Augustine of Hippo, late fourth and early fifth century

St. Augustine appeals directly to episcopal succession as one of the public marks of the Catholic Church. Against the Manichaeans he writes: “The succession of priests keeps me, beginning from the very seat of the Apostle Peter ... down to the present episcopate” (*Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental* 4.5). In his controversy with the Donatists, he likewise appeals to the Roman succession from St. Peter and concludes: “In this order of succession no Donatist bishop is found” (*Letter* 53.2). St. Augustine also connects the authority of Scripture itself with apostolic succession. In *Reply to Faustus*, he writes: “The authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles through the successions of bishops and the extension of the Church” (*Reply to Faustus* 11.5). Later in the same work, he exhorts those who acknowledge “the supreme authority of Scripture” to recognize the authority preserved “from the time of Christ Himself, through the ministry of His apostles, and through a regular succession of bishops in the seats of the apostles” (*Reply to Faustus* 33.9). St. Augustine's testimony is significant because he does not oppose Scripture to the Church's succession. Rather, he treats the authority of Scripture, the apostolic ministry, the succession of bishops, and the worldwide Catholic Church as mutually connected public witnesses against rival claimants.

10. The Roman Succession Lists

Beyond individual quotations, several early Christian sources preserve actual lists of bishops tracing succession from the apostles. St. Irenaeus provides a succession of the bishops of Rome from Sts. Peter and Paul to his own day (*Against Heresies* 3.3.3). St. Hegesippus appears to have compiled similar succession records. Eusebius later preserves numerous episcopal lists for

Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria throughout his *Ecclesiastical History*. The importance of these lists is not that every historical detail can be independently verified today, but that Christians of the second, third, and fourth centuries regarded episcopal succession as a matter of public memory and historical record. The existence of such lists demonstrates that appeals to succession were not retrospective medieval inventions; they were already embedded in the Church's historical consciousness near the apostolic age itself.

III. The witness of apostolic succession throughout the centuries

From the 1st Century until the Protestant Reformation, there is a witness in every century attesting that there are successors to the apostles.

- **1st Century – St. Clement of Rome – *Letter to the Corinthians***
“Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason... they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry.”
- **2nd Century – St. Irenaeus of Lyons – *Against Heresies***
“We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times.”
- **3rd Century – St. Cyprian of Carthage – *Letter 75***
“Cornelius... succeeded the bishop Fabian by lawful ordination... Novatian is not in the Church; nor can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one... sprang from himself.”
- **4th Century – St. Gregory Nazianzen – *Oration 2***
“Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, the Judges, Samuel, David, the company of Prophets, John, the Twelve Apostles, and their successors, who with many toils and labors exercised their authority, each in his own time...”
- **5th Century – St. Augustine – *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean***
“You should recognize that authority which from the time of Christ Himself, through the ministry of His apostles, and through a regular succession of bishops in the seats of the apostles, has been preserved to our own day throughout the whole world.”
- **6th Century – Caesarius of Arles – *Sermons***
“According to the Apostle Paul, whose successors, although less capable, we are seen to be: ‘I have planted, Apollos watered, but God has given the growth.’”
- **7th Century – St. Isidore of Seville – *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, II.5**
“Having descended from these apostles, the bishops have succeeded them, and through all the world they have been established in the seats of the apostles.”
- **8th Century – St. Bede the Venerable – *Homilies on the Gospels***
“Although it may seem that this power of loosing and binding was given by the Lord only to

Peter, we must nevertheless know without any doubt that it was given to the other apostles... Indeed even now the same office is committed to the whole Church in her bishops and priests."

- **9th Century – Hincmar of Reims – Quierzy Letter**
"Concerning that property consecrated to God... the successors of the apostles established this arrangement..."
- **10th Century – Ælfric of Eynsham – Homily on "The Nativity of the Apostles Peter and Paul"**
"Christ gave that power to Peter, and to all the apostles, and to their successors, bishops and mass-priests, that they might bind and loose."
- **11th Century – Pope St. Leo IX – In terra pax hominibus**
"By the See of the chief of the Apostles, namely by the Roman Church, through the same Peter, as well as through his successors, have not the comments of all the heretics been disapproved, rejected, and overcome...?" ... "Peter and his successors have free judgment over all the Church..."
- **12th Century – Peter Lombard – Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae, Book IV**
"Bishops hold the place of the apostles in the Church; priests, that of the seventy-two disciples."
- **13th Century – St. Thomas Aquinas – Commentary on 1 Timothy 3, Lecture 1**
"[...] bishops are the successors of the Apostles [...]"
- **14th Century – John of Paris – De potestate regia et papali, ch. 10–11**
"The pope and bishops are vicars of Christ and successors of the Apostles."
- **15th Century – Jan Hus – De ecclesia**
"Not only bishops but all presbyters are successors of the Apostles."
- **16th Century – Council of Trent, Session 23**
"The bishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles, as pastors of the Church."

IV. The Late Origin of the "Power-Grab" Objection

The question here is not whether apostolic succession appears in the early Church. That has already been shown from Scripture and the Fathers. The question is narrower: when did the specific accusation arise that apostolic succession was a later invention devised to consolidate power? On this point the historical contrast is striking: the doctrine of succession is early, but the accusation that succession is a fabricated power-grab is late.

The seed of the accusation appears in the Reformation. Arch-heretic Martin Luther did not yet make the modern argument of *missing consecration records* or *episcopal lineage charts*. Rather, he attacked the Catholic foundations upon which apostolic succession rests: sacramental ordination, clerical distinction, and visible ecclesiastical authority. In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, he writes: *"It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the 'spiritual estate'; princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the 'temporal estate.'"* Likewise, in *The Babylonian Captivity of*

the Church, he says of ordination: “Of this sacrament the Church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the Church of the pope.” Luther therefore did not merely criticize corrupt clergy. He struck at the very idea that the Catholic hierarchy and sacramental ministry belong to the divine constitution of the Church. From that premise, later Protestants more easily recast apostolic succession itself as a human invention.

The polemic became more historically focused in later Protestant controversy. John Milton’s *Of Prelatical Episcopacy* asks, in its title, whether episcopacy “may be deduc’d from the Apostolical times” by the testimonies alleged for it. This marks an important development. The objection was no longer merely that the Catholic hierarchy is theologically offensive, but that episcopal succession cannot be historically derived from the apostolic age. The question then shifted from “Is this Catholic hierarchy legitimate?” to “Can this episcopal office even be traced back to the apostles?”

By the nineteenth century, especially in reaction to High-Church Anglicanism and the Oxford Movement, the objection appears in a more mature form. Thomas Smyth’s *The Prelatical Doctrine of Apostolical Succession Examined* demands proof from defenders of succession: “Supposing that there were persons called bishops or apostles, from the very beginning; or even diocesan bishops; still we challenge some proof...” Thomas Powell says in *An Essay on Apostolical Succession* that the doctrine had “lately been revived by the authors of the Oxford ‘Tracts for the Times.’” William Goode, in *The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice*, rejected appeals to tradition and succession by insisting that Scripture is “the sole divine rule of faith and practice to the Church.” Here the modern objection matured: apostolic succession is treated as an unproven ecclesiastical claim, opposed to Scripture, revived to uphold institutional authority.

Therefore, the “power-grab” accusation must be turned back upon itself. Apostolic succession is not the late invention; **the theory that apostolic succession is a late invention is the late invention.** The early Church appealed to succession as a public mark of apostolic continuity against heresy and schism. The later Protestant polemic denied succession as a papal or episcopal fabrication only **after it had first rejected the Church’s divinely instituted authority**, sacramental priesthood, and hierarchical constitution. Having broken with the historic realities of the Church, Protestant writers were compelled to supply a historical justification for that rupture. The result was the gradual construction of the theory that apostolic succession itself was not a historical reality preserved by the Church, but a later invention devised to legitimize ecclesiastical power. **Thus the accusation functioned not merely as a historical claim, but as an explanation intended to account for why the Reformers believed they could reject the Church’s traditional claim to authority.** Thus the historical record does not show apostolic succession arising as a medieval or Reformation-era power-grab. It shows apostolic succession in the earliest post-apostolic witnesses, and **the “power-grab” theory arising much later as a Protestant objection against the Church.**

V. The Rebiba Data

The Rebiba issue concerns the limits of modern documentary reconstruction, not the existence of apostolic succession itself.

Scipione Rebiba was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Chieti and Titular Bishop of Amyclae on March 16, 1541, and is recorded as having been ordained bishop on May 14, 1541. He was elevated to cardinal in 1555 and participated in the papal conclaves of 1559, 1565/1566, and 1572.

It is true that the name of Rebiba's consecrator is not presently known. It is also true that a very large percentage of modern Catholic bishops trace their recorded episcopal lineage through Rebiba. Some sources report that "more than 95 percent" of living bishops trace their episcopal lineages to him.

But this proves only a documentary bottleneck. It does not prove that Rebiba was not consecrated, or that his consecration was invalid. Rebiba functioned publicly as a bishop, cardinal, and participant in papal conclaves. His episcopal status was not treated as doubtful by his contemporaries. The missing datum is the name of his consecrator, not the fact that he was received and functioned as a bishop.

VI. Why Complete Ordination Records Should Not Be Expected

The absence of a complete surviving paper trail from the apostles to the present is not surprising. It is exactly what one would expect given the conditions of Christian history. The early Church was not born into a stable, legally protected environment. It lived through persecutions, confiscations, wars, political upheaval, fires, decay, and the ordinary fragility of ancient record-keeping.

First, the earliest Christians often lived under persecution or legal insecurity. During such periods, Christian documents, meeting places, and leaders were not always safe. The Diocletian persecution is especially relevant. Eusebius records that imperial edicts commanded that churches be leveled and that "the Scriptures be destroyed by fire." This shows that Christian documentary life itself was a target of state persecution. If even sacred writings were ordered destroyed, it is unreasonable to expect that every local ordination record, episcopal register, or consecration notice would have survived intact.

Second, the early Church did not preserve records according to modern expectations. The fact that a bishop was ordained and publicly recognized mattered more than the preservation of a certificate for future historians. Many early episcopal successions were preserved by public memory, liturgical commemoration, local church lists, and the testimony of apostolic sees, not by a universally maintained central archive containing every consecration record.

Third, the materials used for ancient records were fragile. Papyrus, parchment, and early paper could be lost through age, moisture, insects, neglect, fire, or repeated political disruption. Even where documents were originally created, their survival across centuries was never guaranteed.

Fourth, Christian communities endured repeated historical catastrophes. Churches and archives were damaged or destroyed through persecutions, invasions, local wars, civil unrest, revolutions, fires, and changes of political control. Rome itself suffered sacks, conflicts, and upheavals. Eastern churches endured imperial controversies, Persian and Muslim conquests, iconoclast disputes, crusading violence, and later Ottoman rule. In such conditions, an unbroken and complete ordination record is unreasonable.

Fifth, even in later periods, records could be local, incomplete, or lost. A bishop's consecration might have been known publicly in his own time and accepted by the Church without later historians preserving every detail. This is especially relevant to the Rebiba case. The difficulty is not that Rebiba was unknown or privately self-proclaimed; rather, later researchers do not presently know the name of his consecrator. That is a documentary gap, not evidence that no consecration occurred.

Therefore, the demand for a complete surviving ordination tree imposes a modern record-keeping standard upon ancient and pre-modern Christian history. **Such a standard is historically unrealistic.** The question is not whether every record survived, but whether the available evidence is better explained by real continuity or by later invention. Given Scripture's pattern of appointed ministry, the early patristic testimony to succession, the public role of bishops in the apostolic churches, and the absence of evidence for a universal later invention, the loss of many records is not evidence against apostolic succession. It is what one should expect from the history of a persecuted, ancient, and globally dispersed Church.

VII. Probabilistic Considerations

The main argument invokes a probability factor: if something is possible but not fully verifiable, one should examine the probability from the facts available. This is a fair principle. But the available facts do not yield "zero chance" for apostolic succession. They point in the opposite direction.

The Catholic explanation has strong explanatory power:

1. The New Testament shows apostolic office, appointment, laying on of hands, ordained elders, commission, church rulers, obedience to those rulers, the command to hear the Church, and the guarded transmission of apostolic doctrine.
2. St. Clement of Rome, writing within living memory of the apostles, states that the apostles appointed bishops and deacons and made provision for successors after their death.
3. St. Ignatius of Antioch repeatedly witnesses to a Church ordered around bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and treats communion with the bishop as essential to ecclesial unity.
4. St. Hegesippus records the succession of bishops and appeals to the continuity of apostolic teaching preserved in the churches.
5. St. Irenaeus explicitly appeals to the succession of bishops from the apostles as a public and verifiable answer to heresy.
6. Tertullian challenges heretics to produce the origins of their churches and traces of succession from the apostles, showing that succession was already a recognized test of doctrinal legitimacy.
7. St. Cyprian of Carthage speaks of the episcopate as a unified office descending from the apostles and treats separation from the bishops as separation from the Church.
8. St. Augustine appeals to the succession of bishops, especially in the Church of Rome, as one of the reasons for confidence in the Catholic Church's continuity and authority.
9. The loss of many records is historically expected, given persecution, confiscation, war, fire, decay, fragile writing materials, local record keeping, and the instability of ancient archives.

10. The Church's appeal to succession therefore appears throughout the earliest centuries of Christianity, long before Archbishop Rebibba, and before any sixteenth-century genealogical bottleneck.

By contrast, the fabrication theory has weak explanatory power. It must explain why succession appears already in the earliest post-apostolic witnesses, why heresies were answered by appeal to apostolic churches and their bishops, why episcopal structure is already widespread in early Christian testimony, and why no clear historical moment exists when this supposedly fabricated succession was successfully imposed upon the whole Church.

Therefore, even if one rejects the Catholic conclusion, the claim that apostolic succession has a “zero chance” of being true cannot be sustained. The cumulative weight of Scripture, the earliest Christian witnesses, and the uninterrupted testimony of the historic Church points in the opposite direction. One may debate the implications of that evidence, but the evidence itself overwhelmingly favors continuity rather than invention, inheritance rather than fabrication, and apostolic succession rather than apostolic disappearance.

Thoughts to Consider

The foregoing arguments raise several questions that deserve careful reflection. These are not merely Catholic questions; they are questions that arise naturally from the logic of the objections themselves.

1. If Apostolic Succession Is Unnecessary, Why Was It Universally Appealed To?

If Christ intended His Church to function without a continuing apostolic ministry, why do the earliest post-apostolic Christians repeatedly appeal to bishops, succession, and ecclesiastical authority? Why do Clement, Ignatius, and Irenaeus speak as though these things were ordinary features of Christianity rather than controversial innovations?

The burden of proof does not rest solely upon the Catholic position. One must also explain how the entire visible Church came to embrace a fundamentally mistaken understanding of authority almost immediately after the apostles died, and **why there is no clear historical record of resistance to such a transformation.**

2. If the Church Can Err Fundamentally, How Do We Know the Canon of Scripture?

The books of the New Testament did not descend from heaven with inspired tables of contents attached to them. The canon was recognized, preserved, copied, defended, and transmitted by the same historic Church whose authority is being questioned.

If the Church lacked reliable authority to identify and preserve apostolic teaching, then on what basis can one possess certainty regarding the contents of Scripture itself?

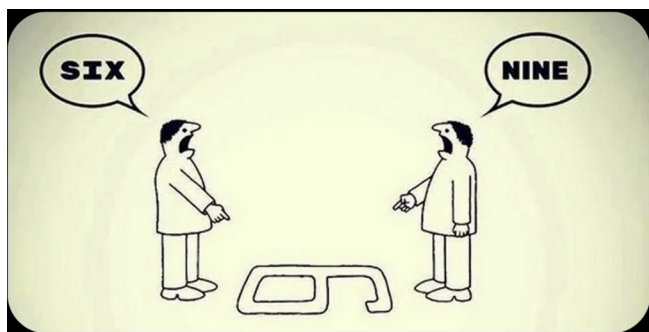
To reject the Church's authority while accepting the Church's canon creates a serious tension. The same historical process that delivered the New Testament also delivered the testimony concerning apostolic succession, episcopal authority, and ecclesiastical continuity.

3. If Scripture Alone Is the Final Authority, Who Determines Its Correct Meaning?

Many affirm that Scripture is the authority when properly interpreted. Yet this immediately raises a further question: **who possesses the authority to determine what constitutes as the proper interpretation?**

Appealing to one's own interpretation merely relocates the problem rather than solving it. Two sincere Christians may read the same text and arrive at contradictory conclusions. **If no visible authority exists to adjudicate such disputes, then doctrinal certainty ultimately rests upon private judgment.**

The practical result is that the individual becomes the final court of appeal. Yet Scripture nowhere teaches that each believer is the supreme interpreter of divine revelation.



4. What Does It Mean to "Hear the Church"?

Christ did not merely command believers to read inspired writings. He also commanded them to hear the Church. He declared that refusal to hear the Church carried serious consequences.

If the Church possesses no binding authority beyond offering advice, then Christ's command loses much of its force. A command to hear the Church presupposes that the Church can speak authoritatively.

The question therefore becomes unavoidable: what visible body today possesses the authority Christ described?

5. How Did Christianity Remain Unified Before the New Testament Was Completed?

For years after Christ's ascension, Christians lived without a completed New Testament canon. During that period, the Church still preached, baptized, disciplined, settled disputes, condemned error, and preserved apostolic doctrine.

How was this possible if no teaching authority existed?

The historical reality reveals that Christianity was never intended to function as a religion governed by private interpretation of written texts. Rather, Scripture emerged within an already-existing apostolic Church that taught, governed, and preserved the faith.

6. Why Did the Earliest Christians Appeal to Apostolic Churches Rather Than Private Interpretation?

When controversies arose in the early centuries, Christians did not ordinarily ask which individual possessed the most persuasive personal interpretation of Scripture. Instead, they appealed to churches founded by the apostles and to the bishops who succeeded them.

This pattern appears repeatedly in the historical record. Such appeals make little sense if apostolic succession were irrelevant. They make perfect sense if continuity with the apostles was regarded as a public mark of doctrinal reliability.

7. Why Did Even Heretics and Schismatics Try to Claim Apostolic Succession?

If apostolic succession were merely a later Catholic invention, one would expect early opponents of the Church to reject the entire category as foreign to Christianity. One would also expect some ancient controversy to preserve the accusation that bishops had invented succession as a man-made system for seizing power. The early centuries were full of disputes over doctrine, discipline, episcopal legitimacy, schism, heresy, and the authority of particular sees. Accusations of doctrinal error, innovation, corruption, and illegitimate authority were common features of these debates.

On the contrary, heretics and schismatics often tried to claim some form of apostolic origin, secret tradition, episcopal lineage, or connection to apostolic men. In other words, they did not deny the importance of apostolic continuity; they attempted to appropriate it. The controversy was not usually whether apostolic continuity mattered, but who truly possessed it.

This is why St. Irenaeus argues against the Gnostics by appealing to the public succession of bishops in the apostolic churches. His point is not that succession was a private Catholic invention, but that the apostolic churches possessed a public, traceable, and open tradition, whereas the heretics appealed to hidden doctrines and private claims. Likewise, Tertullian challenges heretics to produce the “roll of their bishops” in succession from the apostles or apostolic men. The very challenge shows that succession was already recognized as part of their test of legitimacy.

This matters historically. If even opponents of the Church felt pressure to claim apostolic origins or continuity, then apostolic succession cannot plausibly be dismissed as a late fabrication imposed without precedent. The debate was not whether apostolic succession mattered, but rather who truly possessed it. That is exactly what one would expect if succession belonged to the Church’s early public understanding of authority, and not what one would expect if it were a much later invention.

8. Which Is More Probable?

Two broad explanations remain.

The first is that Christ established a visible Church, entrusted authority to the apostles, provided for the continuation of their ministry, and preserved that ministry through successive generations. This explanation harmonizes naturally with Scripture, the earliest Christian writings and the historical testimony of the Church.

The second is that the apostles left no continuing authority, that the earliest Christians rapidly misunderstood the nature of the Church, that episcopal succession emerged as a widespread error almost immediately after the apostolic age, and that this error became nearly universal without leaving a clear historical record of its invention.

Each reader must judge which explanation better accounts for the evidence.

Final Reflection

The central question is not whether every historical detail can be reconstructed with modern precision. Few events from antiquity can satisfy such a standard. The real question is whether the available evidence is better explained by continuity or discontinuity, preservation or corruption, succession or disappearance.

If Christ founded a Church, entrusted authority to the apostles, commanded believers to hear that Church, established ministers to shepherd His flock, sent them forth into all the earth to teach the Gospel and promised to remain with them until the end of the age, then the existence of apostolic succession is not an unexpected development. It is precisely what one would expect.

For that reason, the cumulative biblical, historical, and logical evidence does not merely permit belief in apostolic succession. It strongly recommends it. The challenge is therefore not whether apostolic succession can be imagined, but whether its denial can adequately explain the Church, the biblical canon, the preservation of doctrine, and the history of Christianity itself.

“Our certainty that the Apostolic succession of Bishops in the Catholic Church has no flaw in it, and that the validity of the sacraments is secure, in spite of possible mistakes and informalities in the course of 1800 years, rests upon our faith that He who has decreed the end has decreed the means - that He is always sufficient for His Church - that, if He has given us a promise ever to be with us, He will perform it.”

- St. John Henry Newman, 1847

De catholici dogmatis evolutione, p. 118